

# Housing Crisis! A very abridged history ...

## The Industrial Revolution

Every major change or disruption throughout history is typified by large numbers of displaced persons and a corresponding need for housing solutions. One such historic change was wrought by the Industrial Revolution, which saw a seismic shift from away from an agrarian-based economy to one based on manufacturing. This economic shift drove a mass migration from rural areas to cities as workers were forced to follow employment opportunities. Housing solutions for the newly-created urban working class were sometimes well-designed and built, but were more often inadequate, unsanitary, and overcrowded. Further, despite flocking to cities in search of work, many remained un- or under-employed; poverty and homelessness were common.



Salvation Army “coffins”: these wooden boxes with an oilcloth “blanket” were a feature of some of the first homeless shelters that began operation during the Victorian era in the UK. As uncomfortable as they were, they were considered a step up from the “Penny Sit-up” (where the homeless could pay a penny for a seat inside for the night – although only allowed to remain if seated upright and awake) and the “Two Penny Hang-over” (where the homeless could pay two pennies for a seat inside for the night. A rope would be tied in front of the bench to allow people to fall asleep hanging over the rope). Photo and information from: <https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Two-Penny-Hangover/>

One example of cheap housing built for the newly-urban working class was the “court house”, a housing typology distinctive to the port city of Liverpool in the UK, particularly during the inter-war years. Some court houses were better-built and better-maintained than others; typically these terraced houses were built “back-to-back” and arranged around a “court” which accommodated the shared water pump and shared lavatory (<https://liverpooluniversitypress.blog/2020/02/18/a-history-of-liverpools-courtyard-housing-with-elizabeth-stewart/>). While each house in the court would usually house one family, author Helen Forrester describes courts in which each room was separately rented out; one family per room, and rooms with a window attracting a higher rent than rooms without. Charlotte Wildman writes of Forrester’s memoirs: “We have a strong sense of the powerlessness and deprivation suffered by the poor in 1930s Liverpool and the precarity and lack of support available to those in need, in contrast to the way that more affluent families could navigate and manipulate systems of power that were always stacked in their favour. These perspectives remain crucial as issues of poverty and social exclusion continue to exist and arguably take on greater urgency nearly a century after Helen was confronting the horrific realities of life below the breadline” (<https://workingclassmemoirs.com/2023/10/30/a-city-which-seemed-to-be-slowly-dying-helen-forrester-tuppence-to-cross-the-mersey-and-liverpool-miss/>).



Liverpool court housing, 1930s (<https://workingclassmemoirs.com/2023/10/30/a-city-which-seemed-to-be-slowly-dying-helen-forrester-tuppence-to-cross-the-mersey-and-liverpool-miss/>)

In contrast, an example of idealised worker housing is the Saltaire Industrial Village in West Yorkshire, UK, which was built by Sir Titus Salt in the latter half of the 19th century. Dissatisfied by the poor conditions for workers in Bradford, Salt set out to build a new mill and village outside of the city (<https://allaboutyorkshire.com/saltaire-visitor-guide/>). Saltaire Village is preserved today as a UNESCO World Heritage site: “its textile mills, public buildings and workers’ housing are built in a harmonious style of high architectural standards and the urban plan survives intact, giving a vivid impression of Victorian philanthropic paternalism” (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1028>).



Saltaire Village contained textile mills, shops, public buildings and mixture of housing typologies. Typically, families were housed in terraced cottages, and often a three-story boarding house (for single workers) was built at the end of each terrace. Photo and information from: [https://saltairevillage.info/Saltaire\\_WHS\\_Housing.html](https://saltairevillage.info/Saltaire_WHS_Housing.html)

While Saltaire embodies Victorian ideas about social hierarchies and is aptly described as an example of “Victorian philanthropic paternalism”, it is a testament to Salt that the village survives intact to this day. In the same era in which the cruel horrors of the Workhouse were devised (<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Victorian-Workhouse/>), the philanthropic legacy of wealthy business owners like Salt stand out. Further, it is interesting to note how many twentieth century public housing initiatives could also be described as “paternalistic” in design, and how many have failed so catastrophically that they required demolition.

Beyond providing housing for his mill workers, Salt also built forty-five almshouses with a shared library, and a two-storey hospital. Almshouse occupants were chosen according to strict rules which included an assessment of their character and incapacity for work; if selected, residents were entitled to live rent-free, and were paid a small allowance for living expenses (<https://www.saltairecollection.org/story-of-saltaire/hopital-and-almshouses/>). Almshouses had been around since medieval times, when religious orders cared for the poor. They were originally known as “hospitals” as they provided hospitality, and the oldest almshouse foundation still in existence is thought to have been founded circa 990 (<https://www.almshouses.org/history-of-almshouses/>). Over the centuries, the almshouse model evolved to include places of employment for the poor: institutions called “working houses” (<https://www.workhouses.org.uk/buildings/>). The evolution would continue into the nineteenth century; however in this century, the institution once aimed at the relief of destitution would, after the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, convert into an institution aimed at deterring the idleness of the “undeserving” poor. As Samantha Williams writes: “Workhouses were designed to deter the poor from applying for relief. This was achieved by their prison-like appearance, their location, often on the outskirts of provincial towns, and also by the separation of men, women, and children, the provision of hard work, and a highly regimented daily timetable” (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-british-studies/article/paupers-behaving-badly-punishment-in-the-victorian-workhouse/C44008A5CF56429F8269CF02BF0E1966>). While conditions varied from region to region, the workhouse became a widely feared institution; it was generally considered a last resort when all other avenues for relief had failed.



Entering the workhouse was a distressing experience; the entrance to Birmingham Workhouse, pictured above, was known as the “Archway of Tears”. (The photo above was taken in 2013 before the building was eventually demolished <http://www.birminghamconservationtrust.org/our-projects/bct-finished/archway-of-tears-2/>). Jennifer Worth, in her memoir “The Midwife: A Memoir of Birth, Joy, and Hard Times”, recounts the story of a mother who “sold her hair; she sold her teeth, but it was never enough ...” Eventually the mother accepted defeat: “[she] knew that the inevitable had come. She and the children would have to go to the workhouse” (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1363875-she-sold-her-hair-she-sold-her-teeth-but-it>).

Australia, in contrast, appears to have had a more charitable view of the poor. An account of “The Benevolent Asylum, Ballarat” published in 1868, boasts: “in providing for our poor, we in Australia have the advantage of being without tradition [...] We therefore start fair” (<https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Ballarat/Ballarat1868.shtml>). The article goes on to describe an institution funded by a combination of private donations and public grants, the perceived generous provisions for its residents, the flower and vegetable gardens (“we believe that even the poor may have aesthetic tastes, and if they have not, we do not see how virtue can be helped, or vice hindered, by positive bare God-hated ugliness” (<https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Ballarat/Ballarat1868.shtml>), and the exact nature of rations provided to residents, and non-residents. This glowing review concludes: “We have not yet learnt that poverty is a crime. There is no doubt we are sometimes imposed on; but it is far better that some rogues should be kept by our generosity, than that our fellows, Christian or not Christian, should bear unmerited suffering which it is in our power to alleviate” (<https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Ballarat/Ballarat1868.shtml>). While there is no doubt that poor relief, and attitudes, varied from region to region, this account certainly paves the way for the secular ideal of the welfare state that developed in the next century.



Panorama of the Ballarat Benevolent Asylum

(<https://ballaratgenealogy.org.au/research/ballarat-benevolent-asylum>).

The Great Depression, which followed on from the stock market crash of 1929, was the catalyst for another housing crisis. On the one hand, the private construction industry ground to a halt, resulting in a shortage in housing supply

(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>). However, on the other hand, long-term mass unemployment resulted in waves of evictions and the contradictory sight of boarded-up, empty terraces that no one could afford to rent

(<https://theconversation.com/shanty-towns-and-eviction-riots-the-radical-history-of-australias-property-market-185129>).

In some areas of Sydney, the unemployment rate was 40%; the destitute congregated in various camps and shanty towns – often known as “dole camps”. “Happy Valley” camp at La Perouse in Sydney, was reported as having a stable population of 330 in 1932

(<https://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibition/atthebeach/happy-valley/index.html>).

Interestingly, Happy Valley housed people of every ethnicity, being close to a local Aboriginal reserve, Salt Pan Creek, on the banks of the Georges River

(<https://www.historyofaboriginalsydney.edu.au/south-coastal/1930s>), and also the Chinese

Market Gardens (<https://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibition/atthebeach/happy-valley/index.html>). “Dudley Flats” was a similar encampment in Melbourne.

Dudley Flats was located on the fringe of the Melbourne docks; a former swamp, it featured rubbish tips and a type of dwelling known as a “Dudley Mansion”. Dudley Mansions were humpies built of scavenged materials and were home to the poor who lived and scavenged in the area. The social reformer Frederick Oswald Barnett photographed and recorded living conditions at Dudley Flats, eventually pressuring the government to pass the Housing Act of 1937 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dudley\\_Flats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dudley_Flats)). The Housing Act led to the formation of the Housing Commission of Victoria, which was tasked with demolishing slums, building replacement houses and providing rental subsidies (<https://web.archive.org/web/20251115030834/https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/how-towers-in-the-clouds-replaced-the-slums-of-melbourne-s-mean-streets-20230921-p5e6ma.html>).



The front view of a “Dudley Mansion” constructed from discarded materials, West Melbourne, c1935, photo by Frederick Oswald Barnett ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_front\\_view\\_of\\_a\\_Dudley\\_Mansion,\\_West\\_Melbourne\\_ca.\\_1935\\_F.\\_Oswald\\_Barnett\\_State\\_Library\\_Victoria.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_front_view_of_a_Dudley_Mansion,_West_Melbourne_ca._1935_F._Oswald_Barnett_State_Library_Victoria.jpg)).

Similar to the formation of the Housing Commission of Victoria, the New South Wales government set up the Homes for the Unemployed Trust in 1934, and the Housing Improvement Board in 1937. Finally, the Housing Commission was formed in 1941. These organisations were to assess current conditions and develop new and improved housing projects, given that “the private sector could not or would not provide the quality of housing required without compromising its profits, and therefore that the Government needed to take on this responsibility” (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>). Terraced housing was the stigmatised housing type of the day – widely viewed as ugly, monotonous, unsanitary and overcrowded – and new housing types were designed to overcome the perceived deficiencies of the terraces that were cleared to make way for the new developments (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>).



The Erskineville Re-Housing Scheme, completed in 1938 by the Housing Improvement Board (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>).

## Post-World War II

After World War II, another incredible population displacement was seen; this time caused by the effects of 6 years of war across the globe. Many European cities lay in various degrees of ruin, and approximately one million Europeans displaced and desperately seeking a new home and livelihood. The post-war resettlement of such a number of refugees is viewed as a major milestone in humanitarian resettlement, and it also contributed to the expansion of immigration into Canada, the USA, and Australia

(<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s12134-024-01228-8.pdf>). As is often the case, migration follows job opportunities, and countries like Australia made the most of a cheap influx of labour to forge ahead with major infrastructure projects.

One such project was the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme. Almost breathtaking in ambition, the project is a civil engineering wonder, consisting of eight power stations, 16 major dams, 80 kilometres of aqueducts and 145 kilometres of interconnected tunnels (<https://snowyenergy.com.au/about-snowy-hydro/>). More than 100,000 people from more than 30 countries worked on the Scheme. Many were escaping the horrors of post-war Europe and hoping to build a new life in Australia (<https://www.snowyhydro.com.au/about/history/>).



A surveying team leaving the Indi Camp in 1951 (photo from <https://www.snowyhydro.com.au/about/history/>).

While many migrant workers initially lived in temporary camps townships were also built to accommodate the burgeoning workforce. And elsewhere, the need to house returned servicemen and new migrants remained a pressure: Australia alone was estimated to have shortfall of 350,000 houses (<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/postwar-melbourne-needed-homes-and-workers-snail-kits-gave-us-both-20200819-p55n4o.html>) and returned servicemen were also living in temporary camps. One infamous camp was at a former military establishment in Parkville, Melbourne; named “Camp Pell”. Camp Pell was popularly known as “Camp Hell” due to the appalling conditions and common occurrence of violence (<https://web.archive.org/web/20251115030834/https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/how-towers-in-the-clouds-replaced-the-slums-of-melbourne-s-mean-streets-20230921-p5e6ma.html>).

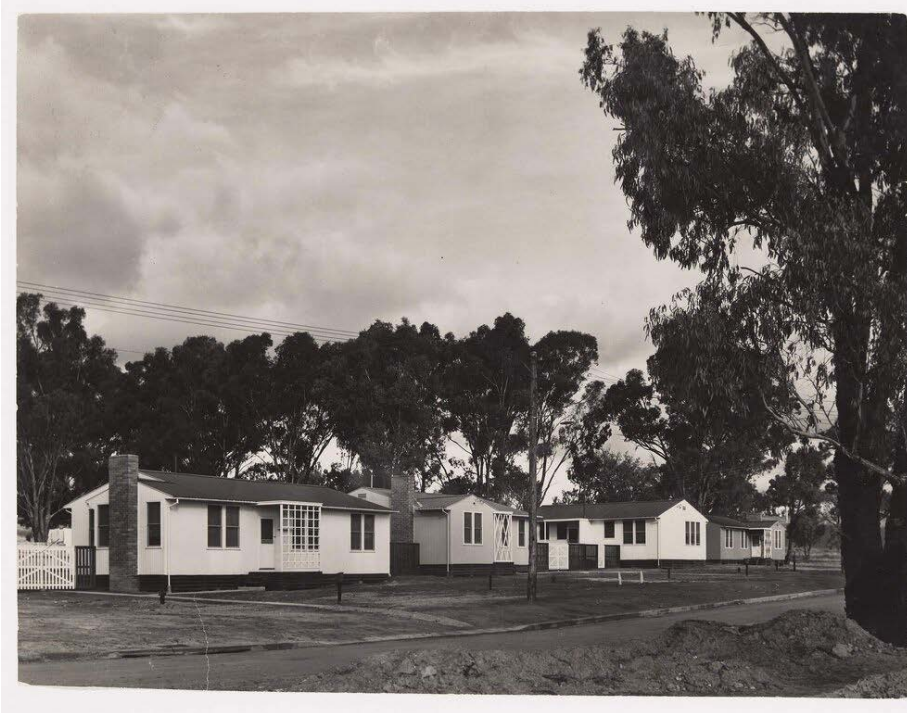
Despite – or perhaps because of – the post-war materials and skilled labour shortages, new and innovative solutions to the housing shortage were proposed and implemented. On one end of the spectrum, a solution to their pressing housing need proposed by the UK government were fast-tracked, factory-built, temporary dwellings to be utilised as emergency accommodation. “Emergency Factory Made Houses”, or EFMs, were later to become known as “pre-fabs”. Pre-fabs were often built in converted wartime factories and were predicted to have a useful lifespan of around 10 years. In all, 156,623 pre-fab bungalows, with small gardens for vegetable growing, were built between 1945 and 1949 in the UK; and around 8,000 remain today (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-68922873>).



American UK100 prefabs at Clement Road, Willesden. (Photo from: <https://www.prefabmuseum.uk/content/history/memories>)

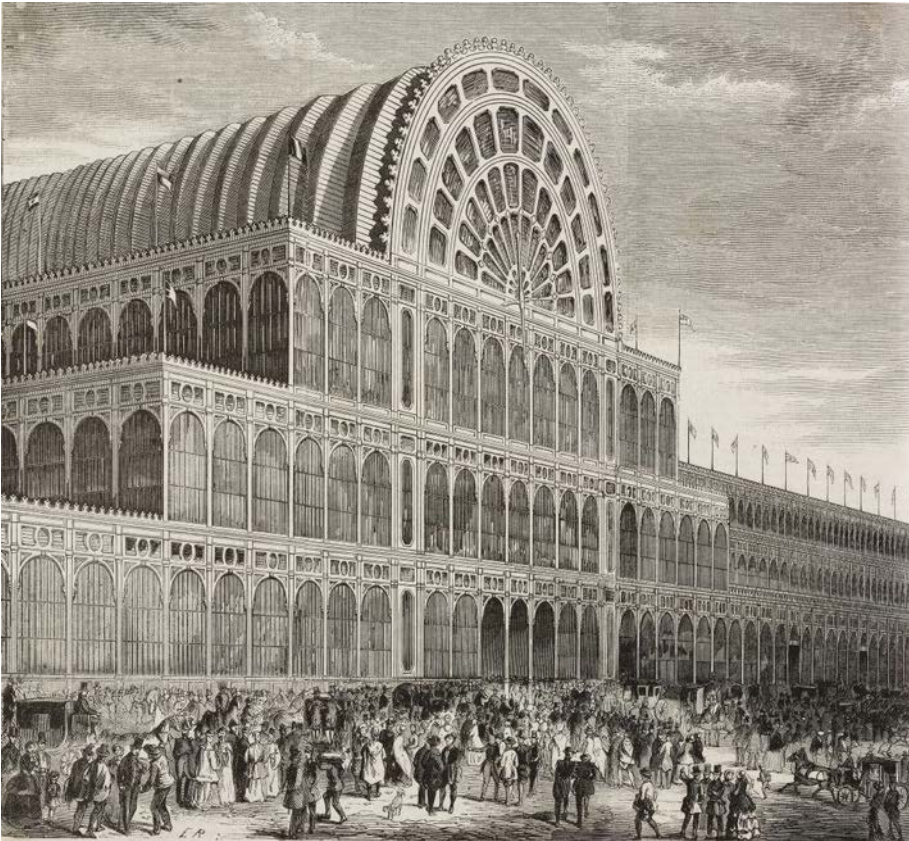
The longevity of so many of these temporary dwellings is curious, and it is interesting to speculate on the reasons why so many remain in use nearly 75 years on: Were the designs, typified by open-plan and light-filled living spaces, fitted kitchens, indoor toilets, and ducted heating (<https://www.prefabmuseum.uk/content/history/design-and-architecture>) able to address the needs and aspirations of future generations? Is the detached bungalow set within a small private garden a housing typology that simply works? Certainly, a residential street that clearly delineates private, semi-private, and public spaces – the latter passively surveilled from the former – is a model that has worked successfully throughout the centuries.

Like these UK initiatives, pre-fabricated houses and re-purposed wartime factories were seen as part of the solution to the post-war housing shortages in Australia. Examples of these include “Operation Snail”, which was named after the migrant workers arriving in Australia, needing to provide their own accommodation, in this case, kit homes “on their backs”. Operation Snail comprised Australian-designed and British-built kit homes arriving on Australian shores complete with DIY instructions. At peak production, 40 homes were manufactured per week, and over 5,000 dwellings were eventually erected across Victoria and NSW (<https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/1196>).



Operation Snail pre-cut houses, Kapooka, NSW 1952. (photo from <https://digitised-collections.unimelb.edu.au/items/12def9fd-9691-57cb-a542-51c79d2347be>)

However, the interest in factory-made buildings and structural components didn't end with the production of kit homes. Prefabrication, and innovative manufacturing processes informed the design and construction of much, much larger buildings. As Ray Edgar writes: "The wartime systems behind prefabricating timber-trussed hangars, houses and factories, was transferred to building the repetitive glass and steel facades of the glazed curtain wall skyscraper" (<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/postwar-melbourne-needed-homes-and-workers-snail-kits-gave-us-both-20200819-p55n4o.html>). Drawing from the structural feats of Victorian manufacturing, such as the Crystal Palace, and medical and architectural insights from tuberculosis sanatorium design (<https://www.archdaily.com/1028559/in-pursuit-of-health-how-medical-concerns-shaped-modernist-architecture>), architects now had the means – and the social licence – to create a new style of building, one which would embody optimism and post-war ambitions for a peaceful and prosperous society.



The Crystal Palace was erected in the temporary location of Hyde Park, London, UK, to house “The Great Exhibition” of 1851. The structure was designed to showcase exhibits from all around the British Empire – and was itself a demonstration and celebration of British industrial power and engineering innovation (<https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/collections/london-stories/what-was-great-exhibition-1851/>). The Crystal Palace was later dismantled and rebuilt in south east London, where it was reopened as a popular attraction until it burned down in 1936 (<https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/tradition/a26553537/great-exhibition-queen-victoria-joseph-paxton/>).



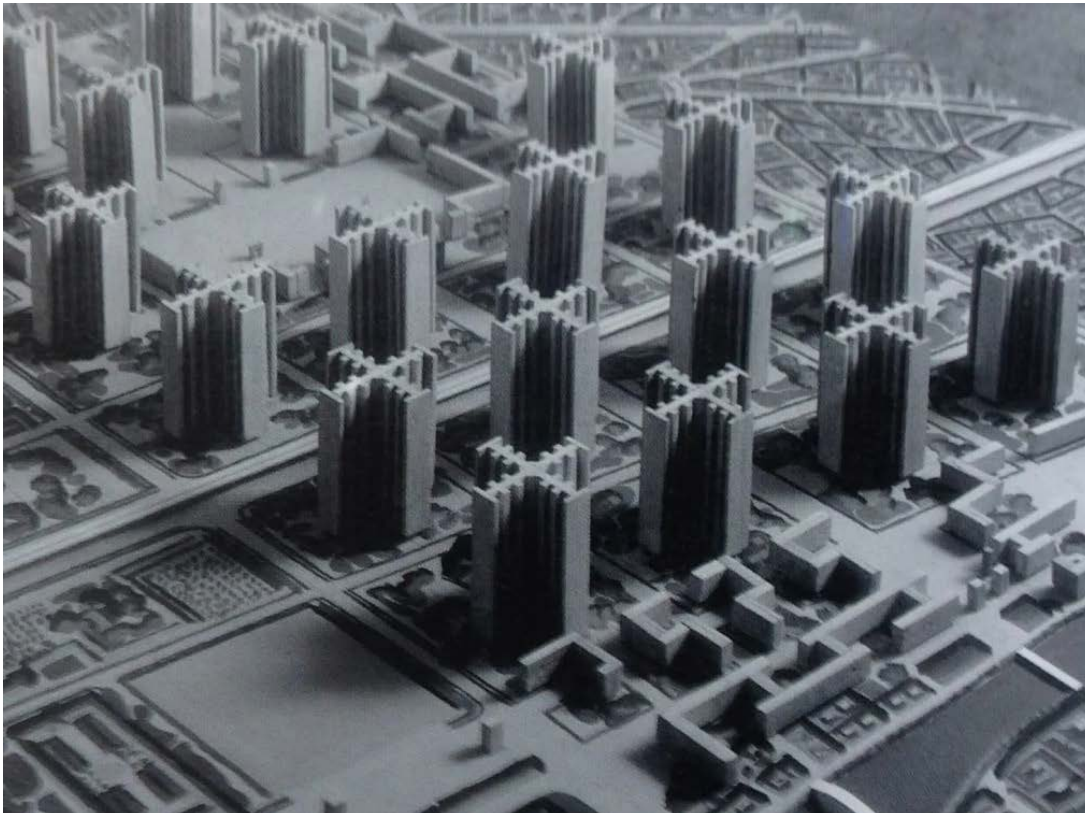
The Zonnestraal Tuberculosis Sanatorium in The Netherlands was designed by Johannes Duiker and Bernard Bijvoet Hilversum in 1925-31. The design of Zonnestraal (which means “sunbeam”) focused on providing sunlight, fresh air, and cleanliness to promote patients’ recuperation (<https://www.of-convalescence.com/entries/zonnestraal>). The sanatorium building typology of the early twentieth century – centring on functional design, hygiene, and access to sunlight, fresh air and the landscape beyond – played a pivotal role in informing both the rationale and aesthetics of much of post-war residential architectural projects.

Rather than replacing like for like, the task of designing and building for post-war housing needs allowed architects to imagine and construct the cities of the future. These new utopian developments were envisaged to solve previous problems of inner-city squalor that characterised post-industrial cities; new architectural forms would both symbolise and embody social progress and the rise of the welfare state (<https://theconversation.com/how-the-high-rise-tower-block-came-to-symbolise-the-contradictions-of-modern-britain-267047>). Drawing on modernist architects such as the Swiss-born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris (popularly known as Le Corbusier) architects designed neighbourhoods filled with high-rise buildings which would promote “health, efficiency, and social order” (<https://www.dcaplanning.com.au/post/le-corbusier-s-radiant-city-concept-what-worked-and-what-went-wrong>).

Le Corbusier was arguably one of the most influential architects of this new style. He had been working on schemes for a “Contemporary City” since the 1920’s, believing that problems of congestion and poor sanitation could be solved through the widescale demolition of existing buildings and streets, to be replaced with town planning that embraced “the machine age”: he proposed that cities be built as a series of geometrically arranged soaring towers, surrounded by green spaces for recreation, and connected by elevated super-highways (<https://global.ctbuh.org/resources/papers/download/305-the-race-for-the-sky-unbuilt-skyscrapers.pdf>). Corbusier promoted his schemes as rational solutions to improving people’s living conditions, however while his ideas were extremely influential, his legacy is complicated

and his ideology has often led to misery and spectacularly failed projects. As Alessandro Hseuh-Bruni writes: “the damage that Le Corbusier, his modernist philosophy, and his followers have done to the urban form are undeniable. His policies have led to the isolation and marginalization of certain groups, the creation of an unsustainable car-dependent society, and a shift away from the organic feel of traditional cities, which are all issues that are still being dealt with in the 21st century”

(<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/community.38593830.pdf>).



Le Corbusier’s “Towers in the Park”. He envisaged that these towers, surrounded by parklands, would simultaneously ease city congestion and augment population density. Corbusier’s residential tower designs were inaccurately and enthusiastically replicated during the 1960’s and 70’s (<https://www.planetizen.com/definition/le-corbusier>).

Corbusier’s ideas around motor vehicle transportation influenced other twentieth century architects’ writings and work; of note is Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s 1972 book “Learning From Las Vegas” in which, together with architect Steven Izenou, they extol the virtues of a city designed around the motor vehicle. They promoted a new style of architecture which could be experienced from a car. Significantly, they believed that signage was more important than the buildings themselves (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/robert-venturi-postmodern-architect-less-is-a-bore-a8555936.html>). Despite a perception that Corbusier was similarly enthused by the motor vehicle, it is to be noted that his city designs allowed for large proportions of green spaces and pedestrian pathways (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2095263521000388>).



The Seattle Art Museum, by Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/robert-venturi-cornerstone-postmodern-architecture-dies-93-11023/>). Note the giant letters carved into the façade, imprinting on the building their belief in billboard-sized signs that could be experienced from inside a moving car (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/robert-venturi-postmodern-architect-less-is-a-bore-a8555936.html>).

While there is no question that Corbusier planned for green space and pedestrian recreation, there is a question over whether the spaces he envisaged would function as recreation space in the real world. While the separation of pedestrian pathways from roads and buildings removed the threat to pedestrians from motorised transport, the separation also included the removal of passive surveillance. As David Carey writes: “the model destroyed the very thing that makes a city vibrant: the intricate, mixed-use “street ballet” with its eyes on the street, small businesses, and social interaction. The vast, undefined green spaces between towers often became barren, unsafe, and unused” (<https://www.dcaplanning.com.au/post/le-corbusier-s-radiant-city-concept-what-worked-and-what-went-wrong>).

The urban activist Jane Jacobs drew a parallel between these barren and unsafe green spaces, and the corridors, lifts and stairwells of public housing tower blocks. Lacking the amenities of the apartment blocks of the more affluent – secure entries, a concierge service and active surveillance, and regular maintenance – the shared interior spaces of public housing towers are not well-equipped to handle strangers and can become spaces for destructive and menacing behaviour (<https://www.dcaplanning.com.au/post/le-corbusier-s-radiant-city-concept-what-worked-and-what-went-wrong>). In an interview about the failed public housing project “Brownlie Towers” in Bentley, Perth, Department of Housing spokesperson Nadia D’Hart discusses how the parklands weren’t utilised as imagined: a lack of street life and passive surveillance meant that residents didn’t feel comfortable walking through the parks; in turn, the parks would become areas used for rubbish dumping, vandalism and antisocial behaviour (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocPEFBhRuzg>).



Brownlie Towers around the time that the project was opened (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6905967/How-public-housing-experiment-Brownlie-Towers-nightmare.html>). The twin towers were the centrepiece of a carefully planned and idealistic public housing project opened in 1971. These two 10-storey apartment buildings stood in the middle of open parklands, flanked by townhouses, and serviced by a grocery store, chemist, butcher, school and swimming pool. Not long after residents moved in – and to the planners’ horror – the project “quickly disintegrated into a hotbed of crime, becoming synonymous with murders, suicides, violence and drug abuse” (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-07/brownlie-towers-housing-complex-faces-demolition/10918264>). The towers became popularly known as “Suicide Towers”. D’Hart discusses the frequent suicides at the complex, maintaining that they were mainly “people who lived outside of the precinct” and that it was “a burden that the people of the towers lived with every day” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocPEFBhRuzg>). The thesis that lax security, and a lack of surveillance and maintenance, can foster destructive behaviours in the shared spaces both inside and outside of a “tower in a park”, seemed to be proved correct; and an additional design flaw to the project had become apparent: that of easy public access to high balconies.



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Eventually the balconies at Brownlie Towers had steel wires installed to discourage the regular (reportedly weekly) suicides at the complex (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6905967/How-public-housing-experiment-Brownlie-Towers-nightmare.html>).

The 1960's and 70's saw the rise of the high-rise apartment building as the predominant solution to public housing shortages. However, this housing typology quickly became stigmatised by association with concerns about crime, mental and physical health ill-effects and negative impacts on childhood development (<https://landscapeaustralia.com/articles/is-highrise-living-bad-for-you/>). British historian Holly Smith coined the term “theatre of stigma” to describe popular narratives around high-rise social housing (<https://theconversation.com/how-the-high-rise-tower-block-came-to-symbolise-the-contradictions-of-modern-britain-267047>). The iconic comedy show “Only Fools and Horses”

was based around an extended family who lived in a council flat in the East End of London and despite the comedic narrative, it perhaps portrayed a more nuanced view of this apartment style. The Trotter family occasionally tried to leave the flat, but the attempts always failed; and their affection for the flat is apparent despite its shortcomings. One public housing tenant described the love-hate relationship to Smith this way: “During 35 years you become attached to the four walls even if they’re not very good walls” (<https://theconversation.com/how-the-high-rise-tower-block-came-to-symbolise-the-contradictions-of-modern-britain-267047>).



The fictional family, the Trotters, moved back into their council flat in Peckham, London, after Del Boy lost their fortune (<https://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-news/only-fools-horses-famous-flat-33725844>).

Decades on, and researchers are still trying to analyse the relationships between housing type and social and health outcomes. One finding that seems to have broad consensus is that high-rise living is not considered to be suitable for children: “All studies of behavioural problems, for example tantrums or hyperactivity, identify higher rates of incidence among children living in highrises. Research shows that access to green space may ameliorate these behaviours” (<https://landscapeaustralia.com/articles/is-highrise-living-bad-for-you/>). Apartment design that provides for the needs of families must be prioritised if this style of housing is to succeed in our cities. Besides the issue of access to play space, issues around safety are paramount; research in Sydney has shown an increase in children presenting at the Children’s Hospital with serious injuries from falling from apartment windows and balconies (<https://theconversation.com/more-children-are-living-in-high-rise-apartments-so-designers-should-keep-them-in-mind-100756>).



In the early twentieth century “baby cages” were promoted as an effective way of providing babies in high-rise buildings with access to sunlight and fresh air. Given the prevalence of Rickets in inner-city areas – a weakening of the bone in children caused by a lack of Vitamin D, which led to deformities ([https://adc.bmj.com/content/110/Suppl\\_1/A51.1](https://adc.bmj.com/content/110/Suppl_1/A51.1)) – this solution had some scientific support. However, by the 1950s, concerns about child safety saw their use be discontinued, despite the perceived health benefits (<https://thehistoryinsider.com/baby-cages/>). Disturbingly, there has been a recurrence of this preventable disease in recent years, highlighting the ongoing importance of sunlight (and good nutrition) for early childhood ([https://adc.bmj.com/content/110/Suppl\\_1/A51.1](https://adc.bmj.com/content/110/Suppl_1/A51.1)).

Access to green spaces and outdoor play areas is also paramount for childhood development, not just disease management. Of perhaps equal importance are internal play areas that are safe (no fall risk) and acoustically appropriate: many parents in high rise buildings report curtailing children’s play for fear of disturbing the neighbours (<https://theconversation.com/more-children-are-living-in-high-rise-apartments-so-designers-should-keep-them-in-mind-100756>). Interestingly, research doesn’t definitively show the same drawbacks of high-rise living for adults; perhaps because adults spend a greater proportion of

their time out of the home. The lockdowns during the recent global pandemic, when everyone was required to stay at home – sometimes for weeks at a time – brought to light that many adults had previously coped with poor housing by spending time away from their home. Dr Marlee Boyer from Sydney University describes the results of a survey into well-being during lockdowns: “In normal times, people talked about being able to cope by spending more time outside their house ... but in lockdown, it took away this capacity and many felt like their housing problems were now just staring them in the face” (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-13/covid-lockdown-mental-health-and-anxiety-depends-on-housing/100369398>). As pre-Covid research was already showing, all residents of high rise buildings benefit from free, accessible, good-quality and well-maintained public spaces (<https://theconversation.com/whats-equity-got-to-do-with-health-in-a-higher-density-city-82071>).

## The post-Covid housing crisis

The current housing crisis bears many similarities to previous crises; homelessness is on the rise as households are unable to secure affordable accommodation. Again, the supply of housing is an issue. Despite generous stimulus packages from both the Federal and State governments, the construction industry slowed during the Covid years, due to shortages of skilled labour and disruption of supply chains for building materials (<https://www.turnerandtownsend.com/insights/the-lasting-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-australian-construction-sector/>). Covid lockdowns accelerated the number of new households formed, in part due to relationship breakdowns and share house dissolutions; the supply of new housing has not kept up with this rise in demand. Between 2016 and 2021, household numbers increased by 11.9% and new residential dwellings increased by only 10.6%. Internal migration, international migration, and the short-term rental market have also affected demand in various locations (<https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/brief/why-does-australia-have-rental-crisis-and-what-can-be-done-about-it>).



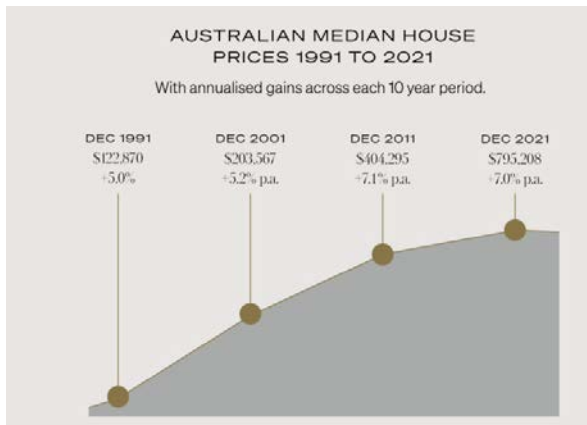
Homelessness is on the rise, forcing many families to live in tents or in their cars (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-12-09/families-left-with-no-choice-but-to-live-in-tents-in-the-bush/103177116>). However, unlike the Great Depression’s “dole camps”, this homelessness is not generally caused by unemployment, but rather by a lack of affordable rental accommodation. When demand outstrips supply, prices are forced upwards, until they can become out of reach even for households with full-time employment.

Social housing, once seen as a safety net, is in short supply following decades of steadily decreasing government investment due to a long stretch of relative prosperity, and the attitude that the provision of social housing resulted in passive tenants who lacked initiative (<https://theconversation.com/how-the-high-rise-tower-block-came-to-symbolise-the-contradictions-of-modern-britain-267047>). Schemes such as Margaret Thatcher’s “right to buy” policy in the UK – which was popular, and which had merit in promoting property ownership – were implemented. This UK scheme oversaw the sale of government housing at a heavy discount (an average discount of 43%, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/aug/03/right-to-buy-england-fuelled-housing-crisis-cost-taxpayers-common-weath-report>) with the strict rule that money raised could not be reinvested in housing (<https://www.ft.com/content/8d5f2952-3c17-11e8-bcc8-cebcb81f1f90>). While Australia did not adopt a similar policy, investment in social housing dropped dramatically. Social housing dwelling completions “fell from an average of 16 percent from 1945 to 1972, to nine percent over the 1980s, and down to five percent in the 1990s” (<https://innersydneyvoice.org.au/articles/a-history-of-public-housing/>).



Margaret Thatcher with the new owner of the 1,000th sold-off London council home, 1979 (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/aug/03/right-to-buy-england-fuelled-housing-crisis-cost-taxpayers-common-weath-report>). Paradoxically, the fear that social housing leads to passive tenants has led to the rise of a new passive class, that of the private landlord. Property has come to be viewed as a low-effort and low-risk investment which yields high returns; indeed, the median Sydney house can, and often does, earn more than the median full-time worker (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-09/how-housing-made-50-per-cent-of-australia-richer/101825752>). In the UK, many of the “right to buy” houses are now no longer owner-occupied but rather rented out to tenants on social housing benefits. To quote social housing campaigner Kwajo Tweneboa: “homes that were once publicly owned are now profit-generating assets for private landlords” (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/aug/03/right-to-buy-england-fuelled-housing-crisis-cost-taxpayers-common-weath-report>).

Perhaps the prevailing narrative of “lifters vs leaners” (<https://theconversation.com/shanty-towns-and-eviction-riots-the-radical-history-of-australias-property-market-185129>) needs to shift away from viewing social housing tenants as the “leaners” and instead view private landlords in this way. Property speculation, as well as the shortfall between the growth of housing supply versus the growth in the number of households, has seen a spectacular rise in house prices over the last 30 years. Strong growth in property prices encourages more and more investment in the property market; this speculation has increased demand in a market already short of supply, with the result that would-be first-home buyers are priced out of the market, and pushed into longer and expensive periods of renting ([https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/ada/city-futures/Wealth\\_Final.pdf](https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/ada/city-futures/Wealth_Final.pdf)). Experts are now warning of a new social divide growing between the housing “haves” and “have nots”; they describe a society similar to that of pre-Industrial revolution times: “a Jane Austen world [...] in which none of the rich got rich by working” (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-09/how-housing-made-50-per-cent-of-australia-richer/101825752>).

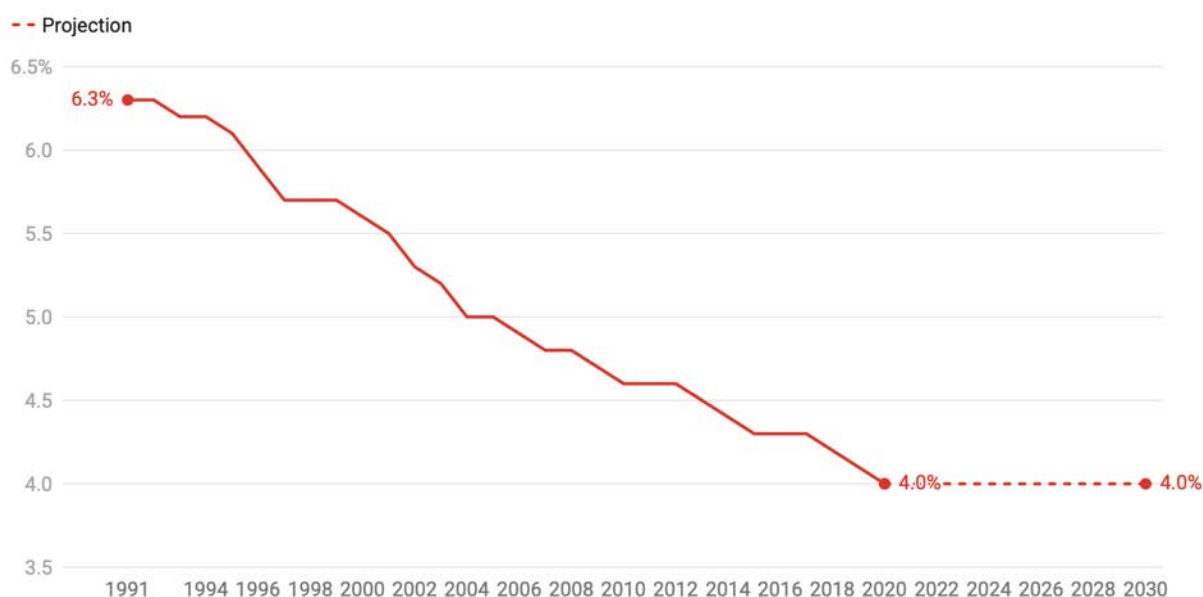


Median house prices in Australia have increased from between 5% and 7% each year, over the last 30 years (<https://www.dpn.com.au/articles/house-price-growth-australia-over-30-years>), making housing a solid financial investment. A basic need for shelter has been turned into a commodity, as Parsell, Kuskoff and Reddelargue argue: “On one hand, we have disinvested in social housing and other forms of housing that are affordable. And on the other, there has been a lot done at the policy level to ensure housing is a commodity to be speculated” (<https://stories.uq.edu.au/contact-magazine/2023/australias-housing-crisis-how-did-we-get-here-where-to-now/index.html>). Australia, and other countries with spiralling housing costs, need to reassess attitudes to housing, priorities as a society, and whether we still believe in a “fair go” and an economic environment which provides reward for effort. As demographer Simon Kuestenmacher observes: “we need to have an honest discussion what we want housing to be in Australia. We cannot say we want housing to be a wonderful investment projectile and also make it affordable for people. You can’t have both. If you want to make housing affordable, if you want to get as many Australians into a house as humanly possible, it will become a less attractive investment” (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-09/how-housing-made-50-per-cent-of-australia-richer/101825752>).

Experts argue that the biggest key to cooling speculation in the property market is tax reform, specifically reducing or abolishing negative gearing and the capital gains tax discount. Coates and Moloney from the Grattan Institute predict that: “the effect on property prices would be modest — roughly 2 per cent lower than otherwise — but the impact on home ownership would be a lot larger over time, as first home buyers begin to outbid investors at auctions” (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-09/how-housing-made-50-per-cent-of-australia-richer/101825752>). Given that around 22% of Australians own at least one investment property (<https://propertyupdate.com.au/investment-property-ownership-in-australia-the-numbers-tell-the-story/>) these types of reforms are considered to be deeply unpopular. However, analysis shows that the capital gains tax discount – estimated to cost \$19.7 billion this financial year – overwhelmingly flows to the wealthy, with 86% of the windfall going to those on the very highest income band, and 89% to the top 20% of income earners (<https://theconversation.com/how-cutting-the-capital-gains-tax-discount-could-help-rebalance-the-housing-market-275213>). Even if a means test was introduced to determine eligibility for the discount, nearly 90% of nearly \$20 billion would provide a lot of funding for increasing the supply of social and affordable housing, and/or other safety nets for Australia’s least wealthy.

While tax reform may lower demand in the housing market, it will not address the shortfall in supply. Research by the Grattan Institute predicts that: “if an extra 50,000 homes were built each year for the next ten years, national home prices and rents would be 10-20 per cent lower than otherwise” (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-09/how-housing-made-50-per-cent-of-australia-richer/101825752>). Increasing supply can be achieved through policy mechanisms such as changing planning laws. However, the solution that will provide the fastest and greatest relief for the most vulnerable is for governments to increase the supply of social and affordable housing which has been declining steadily as a share of housing stock since the 1990s.

## Proportion of social housing to all housing



In Australia, the proportion of social housing to all housing dropped from 6% in the mid-1990s to 4% in 2020. Current investment in social housing is predicted to stop this proportion falling further; however, it is not enough to increase the proportion. In contrast, the OECD average for countries of similar wealth to Australia is 7% (graph and information from:

<https://www.unsw.edu.au/newsroom/news/2026/02/55-000-extra-social-housing-homes-are-being-built-but-a-new-study-shows-that-boom-still-falls-short>). Given that 86% of very low-income renters are in rental stress, and 437,000 of very low-income households have an “unmet need” for social housing, investment in social and affordable housing needs to be increased from current levels (<https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/ada/city-futures/SheterWA-ryanvndn.pdf>).

The provision of social housing is no longer straight forward, however. The current preferred model of development is that of public-private partnerships, whereby State government-owned land is released to private developers for redevelopment with the proviso that the new developments contain a percentage of social and affordable housing. Effectively, enough market-price new houses need to be built to subsidise the building of new social housing and still turn a profit for the developer. Key to this model is the land location and value; inner-city and desirable locations are required. As Zanardo et al explain: “in essence, private property

development on redeveloped [social housing] estates would fund the replacement of, and a slight increase in, social housing. Rather than public housing managed by the state housing authority, this social housing would be managed by community housing organizations, capitalizing on those organizations' exemption from paying Goods and Services Tax and their tenants' eligibility for Commonwealth Rent Assistance (and thereby shifting the cost of housing subsidies from state to Commonwealth government)"

(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>). The result is that new social housing projects often do not provide new social housing at all but rather are simply *replacements* of older social housing stock, with perhaps a small increase of stock. This model will not, by itself, address supply issues.



Perth's Brownlie Towers in Bentley, despite major internal and external upgrades carried out between 2005 and 2010, were demolished in 2019. The replacement scheme for the 25-hectare site, dubbed "the biggest urban infill project", has been through at least four iterations (<https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/after-13-years-and-seven-housing-ministers-it-s-back-to-square-one-for-perth-s-biggest-urban-infill-project-20240227-p5f85q.html>). The latest Bentley Redevelopment Plan was approved in late 2024, with the first land set to be released for sale in March 2026

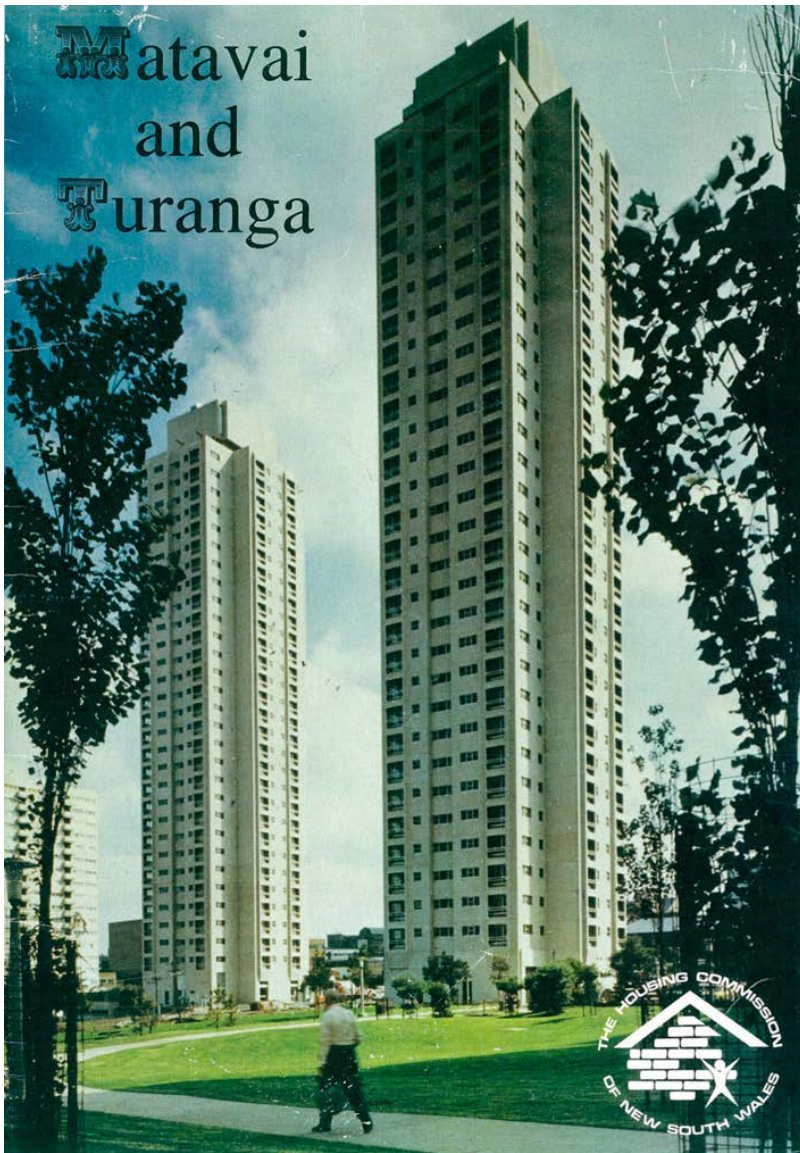
(<https://developmentwa.com.au/projects/redevelopment/heartwood-bentley/overview>). The proportion of social- to market-rate housing is set to be 1 in 7

(<https://developmentwa.com.au/projects/redevelopment/heartwood-bentley/faqs>).

Given the social problems that plagued the former social housing precinct, there was little public resistance to its demolition. One former resident said, "I wouldn't say I'm stronger but probably a little bit jaded towards violence and deaths and suicides and all that sort of stuff [...] I won't miss the place. There won't be any tears shed for it that's for sure"

(<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-07/brownlie-towers-housing-complex-faces->

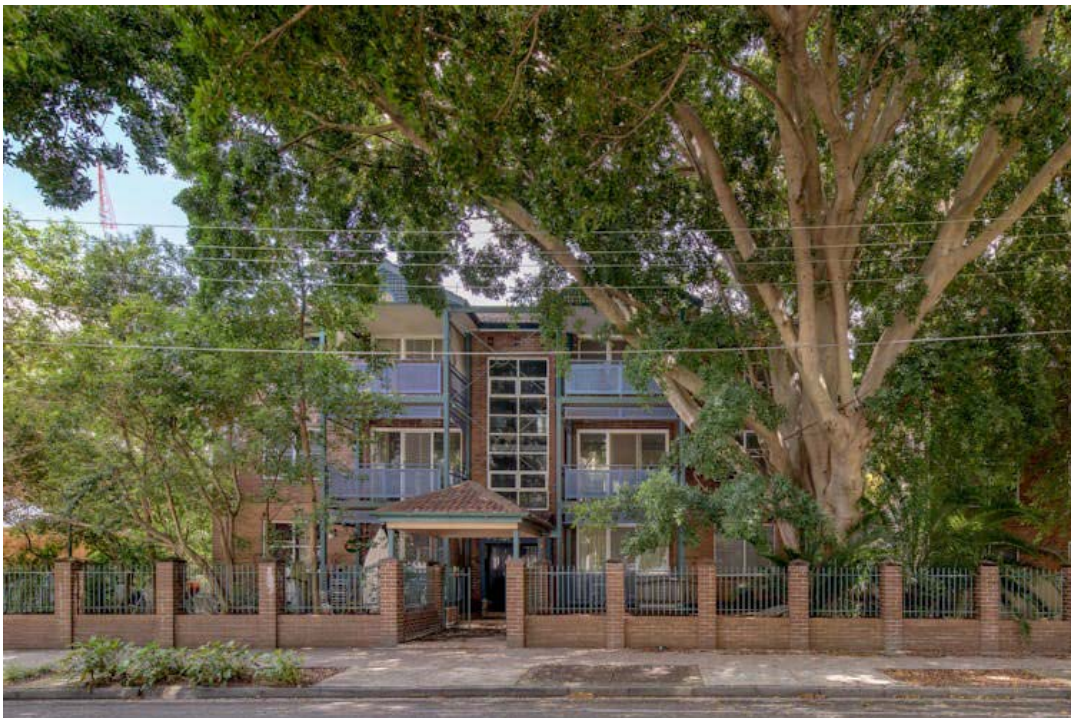
[demolition/10918264](#)). However, long delays in securing the private partnership seen to be necessary for developing the site, has drawn criticism (<https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/after-13-years-and-seven-housing-ministers-it-s-back-to-square-one-for-perth-s-biggest-urban-infill-project-20240227-p5f85q.html>). Similarly, the social housing estate of Waterloo in Sydney's inner south, has been earmarked for a public-private partnership redevelopment.



The Waterloo estate is probably best known for its twin towers “Matavai” and “Turanga”, two 30-storey towers built in the early 1970’s (pictured here on the cover of a Housing Commission of NSW publication, photo from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>). However, the estate was developed over the course of around 25 years, beginning with four three-story apartment buildings in 1948, with subsequent buildings ranging from low-rise and medium-rise, to four 17-storey buildings, as well as Matavai and Turanga. Covering an 18-hectare site, the estate is: “just a few kilometres from the Sydney CBD as well as University of Sydney, University of Technology Sydney, and Australian Technology Park. It is also only a kilometre or so from

Redfern Station – a major interchange on Sydney’s railway network. Despite this, the NSW Government decided to locate a new Metro station at Waterloo, which had the effect of further enhancing land values and ensuring [the] financial feasibility [of public-private redevelopment]” (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>).

Successive housing ministers and local MP’s have described the estate’s buildings as “no longer fit for purpose”, “terrible”, and “well past their renewal date” (<https://theconversation.com/sydneys-largest-public-housing-estate-is-being-redeveloped-but-not-all-these-homes-need-to-be-demolished-236514>). However, this characterisation is questioned by both academics and residents. Resident of Matavai, Catherine Skipper, argues that: “there are better approaches than a strategy of managed decline followed by destruction and prosaic rebuild. It is obvious that small-scale astute modifications are less socially and psychologically invasive” (<https://southsydneyherald.com.au/the-battle-for-waterloo-a-residents-perspective/>).



Early 3-storey apartment buildings in Waterloo, with retrofitted balconies (<https://theconversation.com/sydneys-largest-public-housing-estate-is-being-redeveloped-but-not-all-these-homes-need-to-be-demolished-236514>).

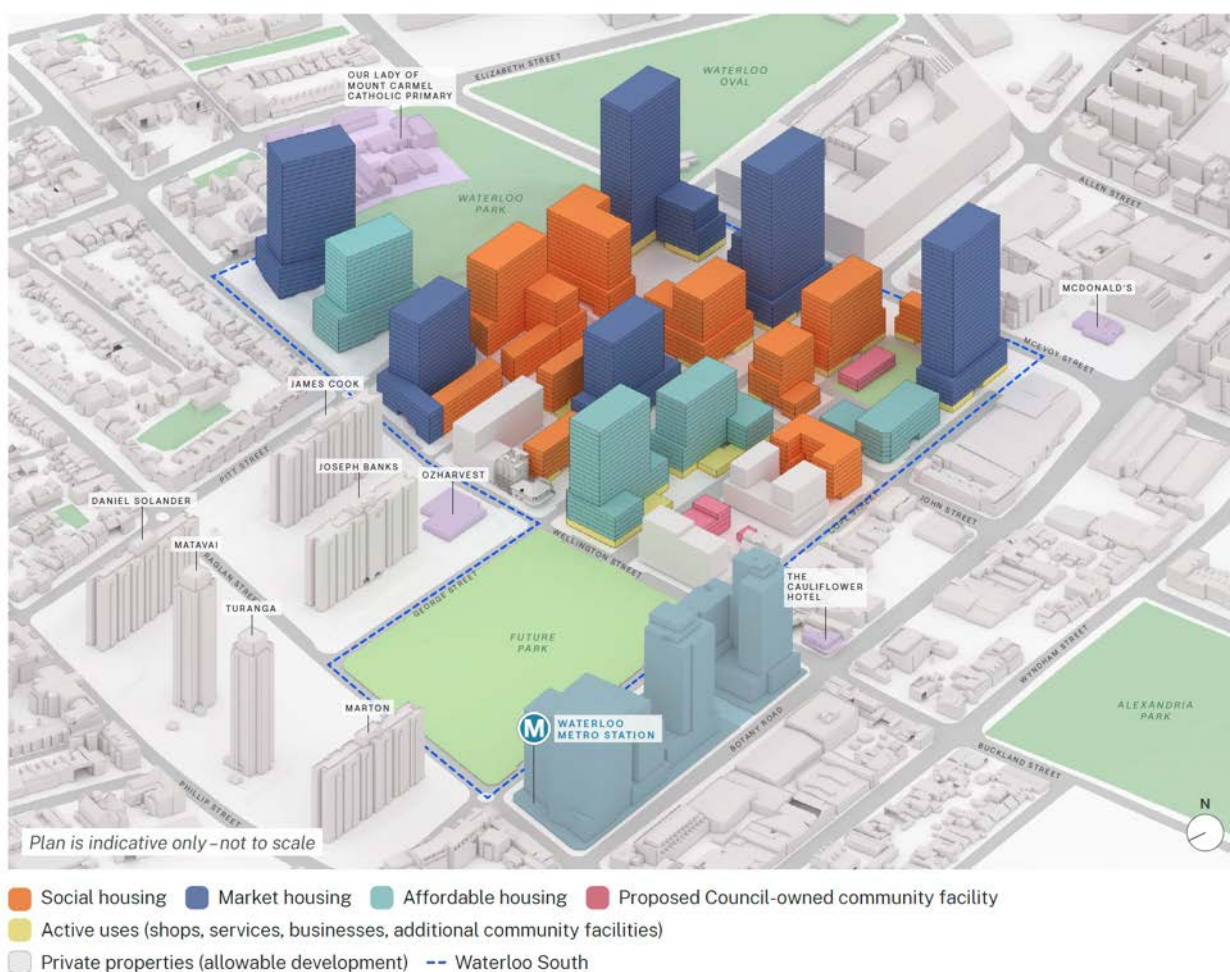
Further to descriptions of the housing being in unfit condition or in disrepair, the estate is also characterised as being a hotbed of antisocial behaviour and crime. Former Minister for Social Housing, Pru Goward, described the buildings of Waterloo as a “honeypots” for illicit drug dealing (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>). A decade ago, reporter Andrew Carswell described the tower blocks as “Towers of Shame” and “Suicide Towers” where “rabid squatters” threatened to attack the residents who lived a life of “misery and monotony” (<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/hope-returns-to-the-towers-of-shame/news-story/4de55acb238b1071b7f006a864d376f2>). While these claims were

perhaps hyperbolic, there was certainly problems of unauthorised entry and occupation, vandalism, and many residents who felt unsafe (for example, see: <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/true-stories/the-block-that-took-my-mums-life-why-kids-today-need-better-than-this/news-story/38af2887c9cfcb00e7fe3fb9236f5bc5> and [https://figshare.swinburne.edu.au/articles/report/Waterloo\\_Green\\_Neighbourhood\\_Project\\_mid-term\\_evaluation\\_summary\\_report/26254985?file=47592050](https://figshare.swinburne.edu.au/articles/report/Waterloo_Green_Neighbourhood_Project_mid-term_evaluation_summary_report/26254985?file=47592050)). Early in 2010, Housing New South Wales launched the “Waterloo Green Neighbourhood Project”, which focused on providing the larger apartment blocks with new security, concierge and maintenance services. Quantitatively and anecdotally, the project has been a success ([https://figshare.swinburne.edu.au/articles/report/Waterloo\\_Green\\_Neighbourhood\\_Project\\_mid-term\\_evaluation\\_summary\\_report/26254985?file=47592050](https://figshare.swinburne.edu.au/articles/report/Waterloo_Green_Neighbourhood_Project_mid-term_evaluation_summary_report/26254985?file=47592050)). Resident Philip Grandfield volunteered at the estate during the 1980’s and says that early experienced coloured his perception of the estate, but that the new security measures have alleviated the worst of the problems. He says that in the 1980s, “it was horrendous. The tenants used the lifts as toilets, there were gangs running wild. This was before there was security here. My initial reaction when they said I was moving here was ‘Oh god, no, what excuse can I make?’ But when I saw this place it has a really nice view out west, I can see the planes coming and going from the airport” (<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/where-are-they-going-to-go-the-human-faces-behind-the-waterloo-estate-20200723-p55eyr.html>).

Notwithstanding the success of the security and maintenance project, it is still a matter of fact that social housing residents in Australia are often affected by physical and/or mental health conditions at greater rates than the wider population. As Zanardo et al describe it: “The small stock and tight eligibility criteria result in an increasing number of allocations to people with complex needs. It is the combination of eligibility criteria, limited supply, and spatial distribution that leads to concentrated disadvantage” (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>). “Concentrated disadvantage” is viewed, perhaps correctly, as requiring “deconcentration”, however the preferred method of “deconcentration” seems not to be to increase stock and widen eligibility criteria, but rather to replace social housing estates with mixed tenure redevelopments where market rate tenants are predicted to raise the “tone” of the neighbourhood and improve social outcomes for all. Regarding the Waterloo estate redevelopment plans, Alistair Sisson of UNSW says, “the argument that redevelopment fixes ‘concentrated disadvantage’ has been discredited by research and, in any case, is hardly relevant here given the gentrification of the surrounding neighbourhood” (<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/where-are-they-going-to-go-the-human-faces-behind-the-waterloo-estate-20200723-p55eyr.html>).



Resident Catherine Skipper (above) is also critical of the approach. She says, ““somehow this will all magically achieve the changing of [tenants] into a ‘better sort of people’, which was actually said at the time – a ‘better sort of people’” She says the estate is already a blend of people who are educated, unemployed, successful, poor. And, unlike future residents who she believes might not live in the area long term, they are ‘bound’ to the neighbourhood” (<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/where-are-they-going-to-go-the-human-faces-behind-the-waterloo-estate-20200723-p55eyr.html>). A further concern is that mixed-tenure developments can fail due to the deliberate segregation of tenants; in London, UK, this practice is known as building “poor doors”, which provide social housing tenants with separate entries and facilities to other residents. As Waterloo Public Housing Action Group's chairman Richard Weeks remarks, “I can assure you, you won't find anybody coming in here paying \$1,000 or \$1,200 a week rent living next door to someone hearing voices in his head, or somebody else who's got a problem” (<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/where-are-they-going-to-go-the-human-faces-behind-the-waterloo-estate-20200723-p55eyr.html>).



Waterloo South Concept Plan, the first stage of the Waterloo redevelopment, showing the proposed mix of social, affordable and market housing (<http://www.redwatch.org.au/RWA/Waterloo/stage1/251029scpredw/view>). Given the prime location of the land, albeit with the burden of having to provide a proportion of the new buildings as social housing, it is difficult not to wonder if the Waterloo estate is now being viewed as a “honeypot”, not for drug dealers, but for property developers. The success, or failure, of the current public-private redevelopments will be a story told by the next generation: they will not significantly increase supply of social housing, but they will increase urban density and market-rate housing supply. Are these increases worth the social and health costs of forcibly relocating current tenants? (<http://www.redwatch.org.au/RWA/Waterloo/stage1/250626hia>) And are they worth the environmental costs associated with the demolition of many habitable buildings? (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>). While future generations may have the final word in assessing the overall success of these schemes, there are important questions we need to ask now: firstly, how much public land are we comfortable being handed over to the private sector, given that the developments are increasing supply of market rate housing, not social housing? And secondly, in the provision of social and affordable housing, how far are we willing for governments to collude with developers seeking to maximise private profits?

In their analysis of the architectural quality, and potential for refurbishment and ongoing tenancy, of the Waterloo housing estate, Zanardo et al conclude that: “the idea that they are definitively not fit for purpose is simply not true. With the possible exception of the slab blocks, most of the buildings on the estate could have their lives usefully extended and continue to serve their purpose in a way that supports residents with relatively modest renovation, or even with additions” (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>). The slab blocks mentioned here are four 17-storey apartment blocks, built of pre-cast concrete, and feature deep floor plans and poor orientation. “The four slab blocks run north to south, with units facing either east or west, which maximizes solar exposure and makes westward-facing units especially subject to intense afternoon solar gain and overheating. The strictness of construction efficiencies does not appear to have allowed for windows to face north or south at end units and none of the units enjoy proper, natural cross ventilation” (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2024.2337268>).



James Cook, one of four 17-storey blocks in the Waterloo estate (<https://beinganolddad.com/2024/03/10/all-things-captain-james-cook-catch-them-while-you-can-part-3/>). The deep plans, poor orientation, and lack of cross ventilation render these “slab blocks” the least suitable candidates for refurbishment. However, over in Western Australia, Development WA (the State’s development arm) is currently in the approvals process to build just such a tower.



The proposed development is destined for the historic suburb of Bassendean. 12 kilometres from Perth city, the suburb is well-located and well-served with a walkable high street, bike paths, and a train and bus interchange. The proposed building is a 9-storey apartment block, built of precast concrete slabs and destined to be 80% affordable and 20% social housing. No mixed-use tenancies or street activation measures are proposed. While the façade bears some similarity to the now-demolished Brownlie Towers, the planning replicates that of Waterloo's 17-storey slab blocks, with deep plans, little or no opportunity for cross ventilation, and every apartment either facing East or West (despite a long North-facing boundary to the plot). Given that summer days in Perth often exceed 40C, all apartments will be vulnerable to overheating.

While the architects of Waterloo's slab blocks in the early 1970's may have been ignorant of how to optimise solar orientation, designers are no longer so uninformed. Even popular house design blogs and podcasts disseminate this knowledge freely to the general public (<https://undercoverarchitect.com/podcast-orientation-and-efficiency-in-home-design/>). Further, there is a growing understanding of "energy poverty" (where individuals cannot afford the energy bills needed to keep their homes within a comfortable temperature range), and its implications for public health policy and funding (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140988321006307>). This proposed development in Bassendean is not only incorrectly orientated, but it also aims for a 6 Star NatHERS energy efficiency rating instead of the minimum 7 Star rating mandated in the National Construction Code. Despite appearances, the deliberately designed discomfort of this proposed building has more in common with the "deterrent architecture" of the Victorian Workhouses in the UK, which were "designed to deter the poor from applying for relief" (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-british-studies/article/paupers-behaving-badly-punishment-in-the-victorian-workhouse/C44008A5CF56429F8269CF02BF0E1966>) than with the failed utopian projects of the post-war years.

Economies in the project have also been made in the parking provision, with only 31 on-ground parking bays to service the 73 apartments, despite the WA Residential Design Codes requiring one parking bay per residence

([https://haveyoursay.dph.wa.gov.au/bassendeanapartments?tool=survey\\_tool#tool\\_tab](https://haveyoursay.dph.wa.gov.au/bassendeanapartments?tool=survey_tool#tool_tab) and <https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2024-07/r-codes-volume-1-2024-mar2024.pdf>). At a development cost of \$38 million, these reductions in resident comfort and amenity – some which will affect the whole neighbourhood – seem less about working within cost constraints and more about maximising private profits at the expense of future residents. This 9-storey development with low level of finish and without basement carparking is set to cost \$6,648/sqm; in comparison, a 2026 cost calculator sets the cost of a 9-storey apartment building with basement carparking and low level of finish at between \$3,326/sqm and \$4,792/sqm – or between \$19 million and \$27.4 million (<https://www.bmtqs.com.au/construction-cost-table>). Other quantity surveyor estimates put the cost of apartment building in Perth between \$2,453/sqm and \$3,270/sqm (<https://kcpartnership.com.au/australia-building-construction-cost/>). Amid concerns that Western Australia’s Department of Communities have only been spending a small fraction of budgets allocated to new public housing and the refurbishment of existing public housing (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-21/fraction-of-social-housing-budget-spent-by-wa-department/100555448>), there is now a concern that they are spending too much on providing new but sub-standard housing.

A better approach would be to design with an end-user focus: how will this design enhance the comfort of future residents? Will it minimise energy bills? Will it promote interactions between community members and with nature? Is it suitable for children? The built environment has the potential to shape lives, for better or worse. As Thompson and Paine write: “without supportive infrastructure based on an understanding of specific geographic contexts and community needs, this way of [high-rise] living will pose significant health risks. Blindly pursuing a uniform denser city agenda will only reinforce and exacerbate health inequalities” (<https://theconversation.com/whats-equity-got-to-do-with-health-in-a-higher-density-city-82071>). New developments should not be re-constructing the mistakes of the past; rather, they are an opportunity to build and showcase a new benchmark for apartment living, one that people can aspire to, rather than shy away from.



Nightingale 1, Brunswick, VIC. This social housing project is 100% fossil fuel free in use and focuses on common and shared spaces. There is community solar and rainwater harvesting, and a shared laundry and rooftop vegetable garden (<https://www.re-thinkingthefuture.com/rtf-fresh-perspectives/a1836-10-of-australias-most-sustainable-buildings/>).

Higher density living is a solution to many of problems facing contemporary cities. The pressures and problems of urban sprawl and a diminishing tree canopy need to be addressed through thoughtful planning and design. Every city will be affected by changes in climate; Perth in particular is climatically vulnerable to rising temperatures, and already has the lowest tree canopy of any capital city in the world (<https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/as-perth-swelters-state-tackles-the-elephant-in-the-room-tree-canopy-20240209-p5f3q6.html>). Apartment buildings that showcase good design through optimised solar orientation, energy efficiency measures, framed views to nature and landscaping, community projects and street activation, will increase the desirability of this housing typology and provide a blueprint for subsequent developments. One example of a successful apartment project in Melbourne is outlined below.



ParkLife by Austin Maynard Architects, Melbourne, comprises 37 homes (20% affordable housing), two commercial tenancies, and boasts a 9.1 Star NatHERS energy efficiency rating. This apartment complex has won multiple awards (<https://maynardarchitects.com/#/parklife-by-austin-maynard-architects/>). The architect has referenced both traditional apartment-style and traditional detached-style dwellings in the overall form, and the imaginative application of materials and colour choices is both distinctive and joyful. Following the success of this apartment complex, a second one is currently in the planning stages.

The utopian ideals of the post-war years, however misguided in their application, are a mindset that we can still follow today. While Le Corbusier’s “flirtation with the stars” (<https://theconversation.com/how-the-high-rise-tower-block-came-to-symbolise-the-contradictions-of-modern-britain-267047>) may have become more popularly described as “vertical slums” or “vertical chicken coops” – we remember the hard lockdowns of Melbourne in 2020, where residents of high-rise towers were locked in their apartments without warning (<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/melbourne-tower-lockdowns-expose-what-its-like-to-live-inside-high-density-public-housing/7lxfh3z0d>) and the Grenfell Towers tragedy in 2017

where 72 residents lost their lives (<https://theconversation.com/how-the-high-rise-tower-block-came-to-symbolise-the-contradictions-of-modern-britain-267047>) – at least designers were imagining, and aiming for, a brighter future.

Successful projects don't happen by chance, they are born from a desire to design and build housing that will enhance people's lives, rather than just turning a quick profit. It behoves all Australians to speak out about what sort of future housing we want in our country. Do we want home ownership to be accessible, or do we want housing to be a commodity for investors to speculate in? Do we want houses to be comfortable and energy efficient and joyful, or do we not care about well-being, the environment and health ... as long as it has four walls and a roof, it's fine? The future is yet to be built; please have your say in how and what is built. As John Flint writes: "delivering good quality, suitable and affordable accommodation for all has always been daunting. It remains to be seen whether we can collectively rise to the challenge." (<https://theconversation.com/how-the-high-rise-tower-block-came-to-symbolise-the-contradictions-of-modern-britain-267047>)