

Melbourne's AFFORDABLE Future?

As housing affordability in Australia hurtles towards crisis, the design community must continue partnering with the public sector to effect innovative change. Housing Choices Australia estimates that the current housing shortfall is about 109,000, with CEO Michael Lennon reporting that the stock of social housing is also falling as a proportion of the total stock of dwellings. "All the evidence suggests that the housing affordability crisis will worsen," he says. "But I do feel that there are lots of optimistic signs of what can be done."

Many projects have benefitted from the Australian Government's Stimulus Plan and Affordability Fund, and the role of the designer in this process is valuable. "The future of urban planning is very much on the minds of architects, urban designers and planners," says Karl Fender, president of the Australian Institute of Architects. "Melbourne is growing at a rapid rate and we need to look beyond Melbourne at five million people to Melbourne through the next one hundred years."

Below we look at four innovative projects from Melbourne.

Victoria St, Melbourne

The Drill Hall project is a partnership between the City of Melbourne, Housing Choices Australia and the Office of Housing. To be completed in 2012, it involves the re-working of the former Royal Melbourne Regiment Drill Hall. The heritage-listed ground floor building will be transformed into a community hub, and out of the airspace above will rise 59 community housing apartments. Director, Robert McGauran, of MGS Architects, says the project demonstrates how to use older sites creatively to meet demand for place-making and housing. "By thinking laterally, good design doesn't have to cost more. Using airspace above is one example that will put people nearer to services and facilities."

The ground floor historic hall and various meeting rooms will be used as community facilities, such as life-long learning, start-up support for small business and health services. McGauran says it is vital to continue to partner with councils and governments on housing. "What's clear is that the opportunities do exist. It's just a matter of expanding the brief. Affordable housing doesn't have to be poor quality, and by building models with a design ambition, everyone can contribute to their community."

Russell Place, Melbourne

Fender Katsalidis' Little Hero project uses innovative pre-fabrication design to tackle the housing shortage without compromising architectural expression. Using a prototype model built by Unitised Building, the project comprises 63 one- and two-bedroom apartments made in a factory before being transported and installed on-site. The innovative building method cuts construction time by as much as half, enabling buyers to purchase an apartment for considerably less than standard mid- or high-rise central buildings. The dwellings were ready in fourteen days, and sit atop a new retail podium as part of an emerging Melbourne laneway.

Head of Fender Katsalidis, Karl Fender, says the ability to speed up on-site construction is exciting. "Unitised Building's construction methodology follows and maintains the architectural design intent of its projects, not the other way around. It also has the ability to unlock potentially difficult sites whilst utilising land efficiently."

The project's modular construction method is already proving successful with similar buildings set to commence in Coburg and Mitcham.

Kensington Estate, Kensington

Originally built to house athletes during the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, this project arose as a public private partnership between the state government and the Becton Property Group. "The number one innovation was the mix of public and private on site together, all managed by the same management agency," says ROTHELOWMAN principal, Nigel Hobart.

Thirteen housing commission buildings were demolished, making way for more than 500 public and private apartments spread over about three hectares. The mix is 80% private and 20% public, with each building

named individually to provide a sense of identity. "The result is a built form that seamlessly blends public and private residential lots, significantly improving the urban environment."

With its contemporary lines and ESD initiatives, it is difficult to differentiate between the two models of housing. "It's hard - the public purse is tight and it is a challenge. But I do believe that the state government got value, and a quality of product," says Hobart. "I'm proud that the end result has been enjoyed by the residents as well as the local community."

Elizabeth St, Richmond

Williams Boag Architects (WBA) is one of three architects engaged in the large-scale urban renewal project of the housing commission estates in Fitzroy, Richmond and Prahran. WBA will design the Richmond project, currently in the planning phase, to include 207 new units (the smallest at 55m²), underground parking, bicycle storage, improved street networking and public and private areas.

Director, John Clark, says the project will be 6-Star Green Star. "Each of the one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments has either a balcony or private garden, natural light in every room, cross-ventilation and views out to heavily landscaped spaces."

"This project is showing the private sector that you can deliver 6-Star in a smart manner. I hope it will start to lift the paradigm of housing within constrained budgets." For Clark, understanding the needs and aspirations of the tenants drove the design, in helping break down the social and physical barriers of the site. "That's been really important for us in building a cohesive environment for 207 dwellings. And delivering for them a sense of pride."

Annie Reid is a Melbourne-based writer on architecture and design.

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP Rendering of the Drill Hall project by MGS Architects (Image FloodSlicer). Interior of Little Hero project (Photo Matt Hopper). Little Hero project under construction (Photo Ian Lang). Richmond project by Williams Boag Architects. Kensington Estate by ROTHELOWMAN (Photo Rhannon Slatter)



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