

Roundtable discussion: Cameron Bruhn and Sara Alidoust speak with Eloise Atkinson, Malcolm Middleton and Michael Lavery to address Queensland's current housing issues and the agency of architects.

Housing is fundamental to health and wellbeing and the COVID-19 outbreak has put the relationship between housing and human health under scrutiny, highlighting the vulnerabilities of individuals and family groups and exposing flaws in the way that housing is procured and managed. At a systemic level, the outbreak has forced Australia to face the reality that we have a severe shortage of social and affordable housing. In Queensland, as in other states, the profession is advocating for change at all levels and delivering exemplar projects.

Unaffordable housing is affecting a great number of Australians, including the ageing population, who are also more vulnerable to COVID-19 and for whom housing access can be more complicated. The pandemic has already made many Australians unable to pay the rent and bills. The loss of income for people with insecure work, in particular, will result in rental stress for those already on a low income, putting them at risk of homelessness.

The nation needs a fundamental resetting of its housing strategies as a key part of the plans for post-COVID-19 recovery. Leadership will come from the social and community housing sector, a sector disadvantaged by the emphasis on home ownership in the nation's political rhetoric and cultural context.

Cameron Bruhn: Are there signs that the current (and rather unprecedented) bilateral cooperation at a federal government level will make its way into other governmental/institutional settings in the housing sector?

Eloise Atkinson: While in detail there are some differences between the housing policies of the major parties, the underlying premise is the same: home ownership is still the superior form of tenure, and that continues to drive tax policy, which continues the inequality in housing. The federal Cabinet and the role it has played through the COVID-19 crisis is a glimmer of hope that bilateral cooperation may continue, not just within levels of government but also across them.

It is very encouraging having a diverse group – including the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy

Union and Master Builders, as well as the Community Housing Industry Association and the Australian Council of Social Service – calling for a social housing program as a response to the economic downturn.



Eloise Atkinson is a Brisbane-based architect and director of the cross-disciplinary design practice Deicke Richards.

Malcolm Middleton: There is an expectation that the federal government will deliver new support for housing and homelessness programs in a post-COVID-19 world. The critical issue will be whether these programs meet the whole-of-life needs of both the service provider and service user.

In Australia there is a history of both federal and state funding for a range of housing initiatives. There are almost too many housing programs that fit within a narrow lens (for particular groups and people in need). In the past, these programs have been subject to the challenges of federal-state interactions and the delivery of product on the ground. For example, the delivery of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing failed to recognize the challenges of accessing remote parts of Queensland in the wet season. This resulted in a one-size-fits-all product type ... failing to pass any reasonable test of fitness for purpose [and failing to create] local skills development and employment.

Similarly, state-based social housing programs, with the support of community housing and service providers, deal with local issues of homelessness and individual target groups. Many of these projects are limited by a program scope that often disincentivizes creative thinking or fails to challenge the status quo.

CB: With an emphasis on shovel-ready housing projects for a post-COVID-19

economic recovery, what types of procurement and project delivery are we likely to see gain traction in the future?

Michael Lavery: The current context presents an opportunity to do things differently – better – now that we are faced with long-predicted changes in social and economic conditions. In the short to medium term, we expect changes in the scale and volume of private construction works; in social and cultural conditions, including our relationships with working from home, transport, retail and large public gatherings; and a shift in property values and rents. Because of this, the need for public housing and housing alternatives will also increase. This is relevant because the scale and type of projects that will enable a transition to the social and cultural changes we are observing will most likely be the kinds of projects that support small and medium enterprise and potentially create the most jobs. The future adaptability and robustness of design outcomes will also be a focus.

EA: The risk is always that speed will be more important than quality as governments race to “save” the economy; design and construction becomes very attractive to governments who believe this will save time and shift risk. But ... the Brisbane Housing Company received more than \$90 million in the Rudd government's Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan and completed high-quality building under some very strict timeframes, largely using traditional contracts.

MM: What previous stimulus initiatives have taught us is that a lack of design can result in poor and costly long-term outcomes. Program development is generally dominated by a short-sighted numbers game rather than the long-term cost benefit and fitness for purpose. The latter approach allows architects to define the scope of a problem and to design an appropriate response that will positively impact on the long-term health and wellbeing of an individual or community.

There are a number of ways we can begin to correct the imbalance. Firstly, not all design standards are consistent or up to date and in many cases are not

developed by professional designers. Architects outside of government need to engage with the public sector (including architects) to review the guideline documents and housing programs.

Secondly, government procurement processes are often arcane and, despite many layers of scrutiny, are capable of poor decision-making and procurement outcomes. Design skill and capability are seldom uppermost in assessment processes. Establishment of select design panels, with all parties capable of standing-offer delivery of services, is a model most likely to obtain the best design-quality outcomes.

The delivery of smaller project work also plays an important role, due to the economic leverage of smaller project teams with fast turnarounds and a higher engagement of human resources. Architects need to put pressure on all levels of government to deliver affordable and innovative, performance-based solutions for all housing typologies. These typologies must reflect contemporary technologies for living and working, sharing in an intergenerational environment, and mobility and interconnectivity. These are must-haves as we rethink a business-as-usual, one-size-fits-all approach.

Projects like the 20 “missing middle” social housing demonstration projects announced by our housing minister [see page 71] need to be better understood, valued and supported by the public and the private sectors to enable them to become the new norm.



Michael Lavery is a director of Brisbane-based M3 Architecture and an architect with a 30-plus year career focused on the public realm.

ML: For government, a number of opportunities exist. Firstly, a design-led recovery presents as a real opportunity. In the short term, project construction stimulus requires the process of design and documentation to lead, prior to construction stages being possible.

Demonstration projects are needed to incubate and explore new possibilities. While they are currently occurring on a small scale, it could be considered as a model for both research and delivery

and opened up to a broader process “at scale.” In financial terms, the shortfall from annual unspent project funds from various government departments could be set aside for designated stimulus projects within that department’s remit.

Assistance could also be given by providing land parcels or incubation spaces to explore new typologies of housing. Many organizations are interested in expanding their community-based businesses and/or seeking investment opportunities, but do not have access to appropriate parcels of land. Co-investment in public infrastructure might be possible if land, rather than funds, was more readily available.

CB: What are the most “wicked” problems in the delivery of housing in Australia and how will the current national/international situation either solve or further exacerbate housing shortages and unaffordability?

EA: In terms of affordable housing, the problem is money! Subsidized housing needs a subsidy. The Rudd stimulus package for housing was a one-off response and when that was spent, things largely went back to normal, with community housing providers competing for grant funding and state departments failing to keep up with demand. While at least in the short term it looks like the private rental market may take a hit, loss of jobs will mean more people turning to community and state housing providers.

The affordable housing sector is working hard with superannuation funds to see affordable housing as an infrastructure asset class like other essential services that have low return but stable, long-term capital growth that can attract institutional investment. This could ensure a flow of funding that could provide the ability to tackle the housing shortage at scale. Housing analysts tell us that to just maintain our current level of social housing would require 15,000 homes per year to 2036. To catch up with demand, this figure is closer to 36,000 – and we are currently building just over 3,000 social housing dwellings per year.

MM: The most wicked problem is the lack of understanding of the role of the architect and design in the delivery of quality, affordable and relevant projects ... For many projects, the architect does not contribute to the early writing of the brief nor to the understanding of the program of services the design needs to meet. These are often delivered in silos because an understanding

of the knowledge that the design process can make is not common within government delivery structures.

This is not assisted by a small proportion of architects who are happy to deliver limited services for limited fees – generally without having to tax themselves with design challenges and site-specific and program-specific solutions.



Malcolm Middleton has been Queensland Government Architect since 2011, after almost 30 years in private practice.

Over many years, the provision of design services within government for schools, emergency services, justice and health facilities, and public housing had been the backbone of in-house design offices. All these centralized design offices have been wound up, with only small remnant groups delivering limited design review and compliance assessment work in structures that have no design “culture” to guide the development of relevant and innovative programs within government at the earliest opportunity.

Housing policy and design is interrelated with community health, wellbeing and quality of life. Queensland needs to use the pandemic crisis as an opportunity to review and rethink its housing resilience from a broader perspective ... Developing more resilient and sustainable cities and communities requires further collaboration between public and private sectors, with collaborative and human-centred design and planning processes. A key component of such strategies is non-market housing. Such developments can be seen as a motor of economic revival while providing support for vulnerable community members and addressing their housing issues.

The four projects on the following pages provide case studies for future directions in social housing.

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