

Architecture News

Rethinking Sustainable Solutions for Social Housing

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It is widely known that the provision and availability of safe, affordable housing has massive benefits for a vibrant and healthy community.

Not only does it improve the ability of people to participate in education and employment, but it has also been proven to generally support their health and well-being. But not everyone in our society enjoys the luxury of safe and affordable housing.

“Housing, affordability and location are integral to enabling population growth, and labour mobility, supporting

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economic activity, and associated jobs growth. Adequate housing is also a basic necessity and human right which impacts on education, health and employment outcomes, as well as the overall well-being of the population. Having a private place to be which is decent and over which we have some real control is fundamental to the well-being of every one of us as individuals and communities. In this sense, affordable housing is both vital economic and social infrastructure" - Australian Council of Social Service 2014

Vulnerability has many faces, and can be the consequence of unemployment, youth, old age, homelessness, disability, mental health, domestic violence, substance addiction, as well as our indigenous and immigrant communities. As our populations grow and cities become more crowded, the pressure on government to provide safe and affordable public housing is increasingly immense.

In years gone by - and to a large extent still today - the provision of social housing has been largely driven by political intent and kicking short term goals. While state and territory governments take a leading role in funding social housing, the federal government's National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) has provided a somewhat more national approach since 2009. But combined with funding constraints, there exists an ever-increasing need with demand still far exceeding supply and a plethora of poor quality outcomes.

Governments have predominantly focussed on affordability and reducing the short-term capital investment in housing. Second to that, consideration of social housing environmental performance – as with housing generally to some extent – has been largely confined to water and energy efficiency. Consideration of more far-reaching sustainability targets, like embracing the benefits of off-site manufacture such as high quality, minimal waste and fast construction, as well as focusing on high thermal efficiency, low life cycle impact, and long lasting, durable structures, have been minimal.

If social housing is to be properly sustainable, it must address the needs of society, the economy and the environment. This is a concept that in most cases has neither been properly understood, nor delivered. There's a big downside of providing affordable social housing that is not sustainable in the long term. What follows is a society whose housing needs are mismatched with a supply of poorly designed, sometimes poorly located, low quality housing, with its tenants bearing the burden of increased running and maintenance costs, and ultimately, premature failure.



communities have and are being short-changed.

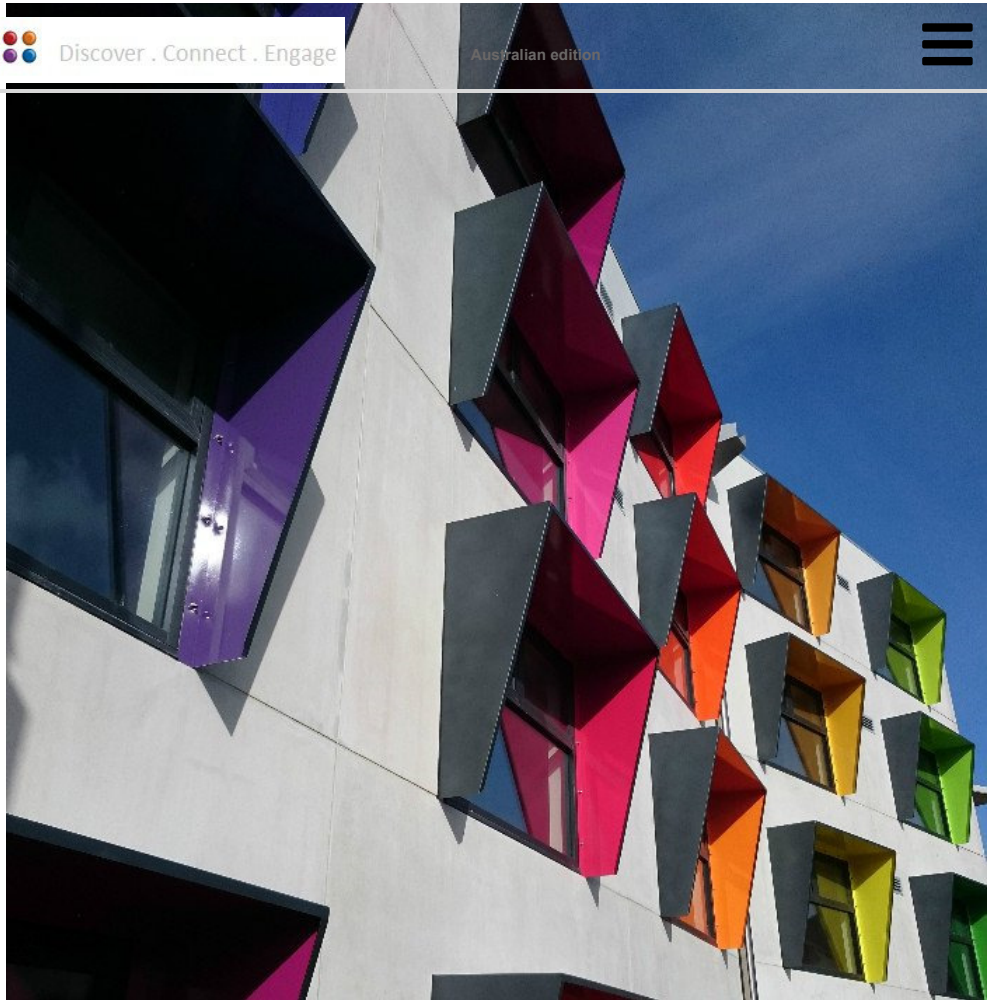
The provision of sustainable social housing needs to be more than just about affordability. Investment must be viewed as a long-term investment rather than a short-term bandaid. The real needs of the community and the economy - as well as the environment - need to be right up there on the agenda.

That means that social housing structures must be designed to be adaptable to meet the needs of all of the vulnerable people in our community. Its construction needs to be fast and safe, using local and recycled materials and supporting local businesses (not built using imported product), with minimal disruption to the surrounding community and generating minimal waste.

It must deliver high quality, long lasting and durable results that are fire safe, rodent proof and flood proof. It should offer security to occupants, as well as good thermal and acoustic performance to minimise operational costs. And it must not emit fumes if it burns. Most importantly, it must stand the test of time and be relatively maintenance free.

Some positive steps have been made in this regard internationally. In 2014 Carboni combined elements from the Global Reporting Initiative and the United Nations to develop a useful framework that integrates project management and sustainability indicators, where all three facets of sustainability are evaluated. Others, like Brochner and Olofsson provide an example of construction-based productivity which measures output around capacity, energy, operations and maintenance, disruption, risk, comfort, and quality.

Increasingly around the world, we are seeing a small handful of governments breaking the mould to tackle the sustainable housing challenge. While affordability is still high on the agenda, a modern, innovative approach involves delivering solutions that embrace the full spectrum of sustainability.



Trinity Hill development in North Hobart

In its commitment to providing quality, sustainable services for Tasmanians on low incomes who are, or may become, homeless, Tasmania's Department of Health and Human Services has embraced the full breadth of sustainable housing.

Designed and constructed using thermally and acoustically efficient precast concrete, the \$14.2 million Trinity Hill development in North Hobart provides independent and supported living for 46 young people who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, or those who have a disability. With access to training, meeting and computer rooms, a library and gym, the focus for tenants is on employment, education/training and developing young people's living skills. The project created over 100 direct and indirect jobs and injected around \$34 million into the economy.

So far, Trinity Hill is proving to be a huge success, breaking the mould of traditional social housing. Not only does it enhance the local area; it's an investment in now and in the future. It will stand the test of time, with its off-white façade being robust and durable, fire and termite safe, long lasting and maintenance free. And most importantly, it is providing a safe and secure living and learning environment for Tasmania's young people for years to come.

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