Expert witness report: 'Cohousing and community benefits' by Iain Walker (Cohousing founder / member and former Chairperson of Common Equity Housing). **Prepared for:** Social Housing Renewal Standing Advisory Committee for Bellbardia and Tarakan Estates, Heidelberg West.

Conflict of Interest statement

Iain served as Chair of the Common Equity Housing (CEHL) Board of Directors for a period during the 1990s. Iain was also active with other community members in starting the CEHL program in the 1980s. Although Iain is still an active member of the program and supporter of the housing co-operative model, this report focuses on cohousing and its' relevance to the Bellbardia and Tarakan estates. This report is not affiliated with CEHL, nor have CEHL had input into the content.

About Iain Walker

Iain is a long-term resident of Heidelberg Heights. In the 1970-80s he worked in the community development sector working with at-risk youth around Melbourne. In the mid 1980s he was one of the founding members of the Common Equity Housing (CEHL) program – a co-operative housing program (that falls under the social housing banner) that provides long-term, affordable housing to Victorians. During that period he also founded Earth Common Equity Rental Housing Co-operative (Earth Co-op), a member of the CEHL program. In the 1990s Iain served as Chair of the CEHL Board of Directors. In the mid 2000s Iain, Earth Co-op, and CEHL worked together to gain funding from the federal government to build Murundaka Cohousing Community in Heidelberg Heights. Today, Iain is still an integral member of Murundaka (which is five years old) and Earth Co-op (which is 30 years old). Iain has also undertaken extensive personal research into intentional communities and cohousing developments in Australia, North America and Europe.

What is cohousing?

Cohousing is a model of community living. Community members have their own self-contained homes but there are a number of common spaces or facilities that community members share. The Common House is the heart of any cohousing community and it is where community members share regular meals together, hold social events, or have meetings where they manage the business of the community. The cohousing model started in Denmark in the 1960s, then spread throughout Scandinavia; became popular in North America in the 1980s[1], and has since spread throughout the world.[2]

[1] McCamant, Kathryn; Durrett, Charles. "Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves." Berkeley, Ca.: Ten Speed Press, 1994.

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cohousing. See: Origins.

Why is cohousing relevant to the Bellbardia and Tarakan estates?

The proposed amendments to the Banyule Planning Scheme seek to facilitate and guide the redevelopment of the BellBardia and Tarakan estates in Heidelberg West to create a mix of new public and private dwellings. Inclusion of cohousing in the Development Plan Overlays and Design Framework prepared in support of the amendment would increase the likelihood of outcomes that align with the Design Principles for the Public Housing Renewal program[3]. In particular a cohousing development is relevant to the following Design Principles:

03 – Safe Places: cohousing facilitates tenant engagement and creates safe, active communities and spaces.[4]

05 – Neighbourhood Contribution: cohousing enhances the neighbourhood character and delivers 'good neighbour' outcomes.[5]

06 – Tenure Equity: the self-management model and participation by tenants in cohousing has the potential to facilitate a successful public / private mix.

07 – Non-Residential Uses: cohousing stimulates local activity and participation, and become a local hub of activity.

10 – Social Integration: the cohousing model fosters social connections between residents and the local community.

---

[3] https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/policy-and-strategy/housing-strategy/social-housing-renewal-program/bellbardia-and-tarakan-estates,-heidelberg-west. See: Design Framework under Supporting Documents.

[4] See Williams 2005. Section: The Principles of Designing Neighbourhoods for Social Interaction. Full reference listed on last page of this report.

[5] Ibid.

A local example: Murundaka Cohousing Community, Heidelberg Heights

Murundaka Cohousing Community is located in Heidelberg Heights. It is an 18-unit cohousing development and was established in 2011. Funding for Murundaka Cohousing Community came from the federal government's Nation Building project and the funding that was made available to the social housing sector. Common Equity Housing (CEHL) undertook several development projects at that time (2009-10), including the cohousing development with Earth Co-op in order to trial a different model of housing development. Initially envisaged as a public / private mix, the development build began in 2010 and was complete in late 2011 with residents moving in for the first days of summer in 2011. The final development was an 18-unit site with common facilities including garden, laundry, car-park, workshop, and a multi-purpose building (called the Common House) which includes a large kitchen, dining / meeting space, and guest rooms. Now in its' sixth year of existence, Murundaka is an established part of the local community with links to other local community groups, schools, and local council. Murundaka also give back; with outreach programs, workshops, hosting travelers and guests, and being involved in other community events. Murundaka has consistently run public sustainability workshops[6] for the past five years with funding assistance from Banyule City Council, and recently Murundaka hosting the Mapping The Groundswell project[7] which was a community-engagement initiative to map sustainable businesses and projects in the local area.

---

[6] https://www.murundakacohousing.org.au/events

[7] https://www.banyule.vic.gov.au/Council/News-and-Public-Notices/Sustainability-Awards

Cohousing in Australia

There are other examples of cohousing communities in Australia:

- Cascade Cohousing in Hobart, Tasmania (est. 1992)[8]

- Pinakarri Cohousing in Fremantle, Western Australia (est. 1999)[9]

- Christie Walk in Adelaide, South Australia (est. 2006)[10]

There are also a number of other forming cohousing groups in Melbourne:

- Urban Coup[11]

- CoWest[12]

- Frankston Digs[13]

- Cohousing Banyule[14].

Added to this there is an extensive number of intentional communities who share similarities to cohousing:

- Commonground Co-operative in Seymour, Victoria (est. 1984)[15]

- Moora Moora Co-operative in Healesville, Victoria (est. 1975)[16]

- Bend of Islands in the Shire of Nillumbik, Victoria (est. 2000)[17]

---

[8] http://www.ic.org/directory/cascade-cohousing/

[9] More info: pinakarri.org.au/about

[10] http://www.urbanecology.org.au/eco-cities/christie-walk/

[11] More info: urbancoup.org

[12] More info: co-westcommunity.org

[13] More info: so-da.com.au/Frankston-Cohousing

[14] More info: facebook.com/CohousingBanyule/

[15] http://www.common-ground.org.au/about

[16] http://www.ic.org/directory/moora-moora-co-operative-community/

[17] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bend_of_Islands,_Victoria

Benefits of cohousing

Community-focused

Cohousing has been around since the 1960s. The original cohousing buildings in Denmark weren't purpose built, but they were people (mainly single parents and older people) who already lived together in apartment blocks and joined together to help one another with meals and childcare. This model was later formalized as it became popular and spread throughout North America but the fundamental idea of people coming together to help each other is still one of the foundation benefits of living in cohousing. We have seen that benefit at our own cohousing community at Murundaka in Heidelberg Heights. After five years we now have a close-knit community with people helping each other with meals, childcare, sharing resources (like cars and tools) and maintaining the community and common facilities together.

Empowered community members

There are also other benefits alongside the community focus. Cohousing and the housing co-operative model, which operates under sweat-equity, self-management model for things like finance and building maintenance, also empowers members to learn new skills and become more self-reliant and independent.

Lower environmental impact

Another benefit of the cohousing model is that the 'sharing economy' of the cohousing community naturally supports a lower-impact (environmental) lifestyle. Residents share resources like cars, bikes (including electric bikes), tools, washing machines, and eat together regularly, buying in bulk and reducing waste.[18]

---

[18] https://theconversation.com/how-co-housing-could-make-homes-cheaper-and-greener-39235

Criticism of public / private mix model

A number of sources have recently been critically of the State Government's approach of converting older public housing sites to public / private mix[19]. Kate Shaw and Abdullah Jama from the University of Melbourne published a report[20] last year citing an ineffective mix of the public and private developments on the Carlton site at Lygon and Rathdowne streets. They cited that public and private tenants do not mix, and that they are separated into two buildings with separate entrances, with exclusive facilities for private tenants that public tenants can't access. I have also received anecdotal feedback from other members in the Common Equity Housing program who were part of a similar redevelopment five years ago in Abbotsford on Gipps Street, where they often feel 'looked-down upon' by private owners in the building because they are public tenants.

Could cohousing be an alternative?

Murundaka Cohousing Community in Heidelberg Heights is an all-rental, social housing development through the CEHL co-operative housing program – though there were early discussions that the development would be a mix of private and public tenancies. Murundaka has been a success – it has become an important hub in the local community (as illustrated by being a multiple grant recipient from Banyule City Council) for different public outreach projects[21] and it is currently under consideration for multiple Planning Institute of Australia design awards[22]. Although Murundaka is an all-public development, cohousing has proven to be a successful public / private mix model in other places, including at Pinakarri Cohousing in Fremantle, Western Australia[23] and overseas[24].

---

[19] http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/social-mix-approach-to-public-housing-is-failing-research-finds-20170616-gwsj3m.html

[20] http://www.smh.com.au/cqstatic/gwsjcu/JamaAndShawReport.pdf

[21] https://www.banyule.vic.gov.au/Council/Grants/Environmental-Sustainability-Grants

[22] Award recipients will be announced in November 2017.

[23] https://www.adelaide.edu.au/churp/presentations/BunceNewZealand2012CoopPaper_2_.pdf. See page 6.

[24] http://files.meetup.com/84213/asla%20reprint%20of%20affcoho.pdf

Cohousing design and planning suggestions

Well-designed cohousing developments facilitate social cohesion and safer spaces and places. Listed below are suggested planning ideas relating to cohousing:

- Common House: a multi-purpose space that is shared, accessible, and fully-equipped to meet residents needs; including kitchen, lounge, dining areas.
- Communal outdoor areas that are accessible to residents.
- Bike storage facilities.
- Shared car-parking.
- Dwellings designed with minimal space and fit-out to facilitate and encourage use of communal facilities.
- Spaces that are designed to enable wheelchair access.

An effective cohousing outcome would also consider:

- A binding maintenance agreement between tenants and their dwellings and common areas.
- Sustainable travel plans.

Next steps

One of Murundaka's goals is to encourage the uptake of cohousing and support our local community to live more sustainably. We would welcome any further exploration of the cohousing model for any or both of the Heidelberg West sites earmarked for redevelopment.

Iain would also be very happy to provide further information or be part of any advisory group (or similar). We would also welcome any visits to Murundaka Cohousing Community in Heidelberg Heights to view the successes of cohousing on the ground. I welcome any further exploration of this option.

More information

Murundaka Cohousing Community - murundakacohousing.org.au

Advancing Cohousing for Seniors – Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney:
https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/article/downloads/Cohousing%20for%20Seniors_Final%20Report.pdf

Designing Neighbourhoods for Social Interaction: The Case of Cohousing – Jo Williams, Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, London, UK:
https://www.academia.edu/4710153/Designing_Neighbourhoods_for_Social_Interaction_The_Case_of_Cohousing

How can we best design housing for Australia's ageing population? – Clare Newton, Associate Professor in Learning Environments, University of Melbourne:
https://theconversation.com/how-can-we-best-design-housing-for-australias-ageing-population-50304