

# Strategically using public housing assets could transform our middle suburbs

**DESIGNING PRECINCTS BASED ON SCATTERED PUBLIC HOUSING ASSETS CAN COORDINATE DEVELOPMENT, LEVERAGE THE ASSETS AND CATALYSE EFFECTIVE REGENERATION OF MIDDLE SUBURBS.**

## KEY POINTS

- Governments can increase community value by developing separate public housing lots in a precinct approach.
- A precinct approach with existing public housing stock presents a unique and timely opportunity to catalyse effective regeneration of Australia's middle suburbs.
- Community involvement in design can overcome typical barriers and resistance to higher density infill and enable innovative and positive change, especially when residents see the neighbourhood benefits as a trade-off against density.
- Blanket planning controls, such as standardised setbacks and parking provisions, can be barriers to precinct regeneration. Councils need long-term, place-specific affordable housing strategies aligned with broader urban regeneration.
- A precinct approach could deliver two to four times more dwellings than current approaches, as well as delivering other benefits like improved amenities and better use of infrastructure.
- A precinct approach can coordinate redevelopment and will require cooperation between government, community housing providers, local communities and private developers.

*This bulletin is based on research conducted by **Dr Shane Murray, Prof Nigel Bertram, Ms Lee-Anne Khor, Ms Deborah Rowe, Mr Byron Meyer and Ms Catherine Murphy** at the AHURI Research Centre—Monash University, **Prof Peter Newton and Dr Stephen Glackin** at the AHURI Research Centre—Swinburne University of Technology, **Mr Tom Alves** at Office of Victorian Government Architect, and **Mr Rob McGauran** at MGS Architects. The research examined the potential of an innovative design based approach to create coordinated precincts in greyfield suburbs involving the coordinated redevelopment of multiple, non-contiguous public housing lots.*

## CONTEXT

Strategies for urban intensification feature in city planning, but these have largely focused on redevelopment in activity centres, brownfield precincts and on major transport corridors. Greyfields, the built-up ageing middle suburbs in Australian cities, are primarily subject to small-scale, piecemeal infill.

This study examined delivering integrated and place-specific precinct designs based on dispersed and ageing public housing assets in greyfield suburbs. It presents a new infill model that leverages public housing assets, attracts private market development and designs sustainable and liveable communities.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This design-led study provides a spatial analysis for public housing policy. It examines existing public housing assets in Melbourne's greyfields and their capacity for precinct-scaled redevelopment (taking into consideration the location of lots, shopping centres, green spaces and amenity).

Various public housing lots were selected and designed as precinct redevelopments. These infill design alternatives were tested through community engagement. Researchers also undertook preliminary modelling of precinct viability, and the cost and performance of different development strategies.

## KEY FINDINGS

### ***Public housing innovation and leadership***

For governments, a strategic 'stewardship' of existing public housing assets can leverage the assets, maximise redevelopment opportunities and deliver a range of public benefits. Future policies for housing renewal, transfer or sale should consider the longer term value of the collective portfolio, not just individual sites.

Public housing redevelopment is an opportunity for innovation and market leadership in affordable housing design and delivery.

The Australian Government's 2009–12 Social Housing Initiative (SHI), where \$5.2 billion was

allocated to new social housing, was a lost opportunity in this regard. Projects in established suburbs largely continued infill practices whereby a single house was demolished to build two houses on the lot.

Barriers to innovation during the SHI included project scale—with smaller projects having a limited scope for design; project locations—where available public housing land was in areas of relative disadvantage with poor transport access; and lack of long-term strategic planning for affordable/social housing and neighbourhood uplift.

Innovation during the SHI included community housing providers accessing finance, having effective procurement processes and facilitating mixed tenancy outcomes; leadership from a 'champion' for design quality (who could ensure that business-as-usual standards were exceeded); and the relaxation of selected planning controls aligned with existing urban renewal strategies.

### ***Location***

High impact development opportunities (where ageing housing stock exists in high value areas with good access to transport, employment, amenity and services) are not common in the Victorian Government public housing portfolio. The majority of middle suburban stock has reasonable proximity to open space and employment, but limited access to public transport. This is a significant consideration for developing replicable and sustainable affordable housing models.

The current 'salt & pepper' distribution of public housing land in greyfield locations is an asset, not a limitation. Being able to redevelop dispersed sites across a precinct increases the physical area of urban regeneration; increases the opportunities presented by local amenity and infrastructure; and reduces negative concentrations of density and disadvantage.

### ***Design and community engagement***

Simple but well-executed public housing design can achieve cost-neutral benefits, such as appropriate siting and orientation for solar access. Careful planning of internal dwelling spaces

provides substantial flexibility and liveability benefits, such as adequate size and configuration of rooms that allow for visitors or carers, and ensuring bathroom access is not from a bedroom.

Good precinct design and community engagement can impact the neighbourhood and beyond:

- *Precinct design*: allows for non-uniform, flexible siting of higher density buildings; effective mix of buildings; efficient parking arrangements; and positive social/private tenure mixes across a neighbourhood. Enhanced public space enables existing community assets to be used by more people. These can then be supplemented with targeted amenity and infrastructure upgrades tailored to local needs and aspirations. Good quality design encourages other flow-on benefits, such as attracting local business or institutional investment through active streetscapes and improved access/connectivity.
- *Higher density buildings*: shared circulation and common spaces can augment compact dwelling options, support positive social/private tenure mixes and mitigate negative impacts of higher density living. For example, the arrangement and treatment of access ways and dwelling entries can reduce noise and increase privacy. Large, undefined open space or common areas can be noisy and intimidating, and are often underused. Clever distribution of small shared spaces that are purpose-designed provides useful amenity and meeting places for residents with shared interests.
- A design-led consultation process with local communities—where place-specific design ideas are presented for community input, as opposed to fait accompli development proposals—enabled a positive and future-directed dialogue around the acceptability of urban change.
- Communities are not averse to higher density redevelopment, as long as it ‘gives something back’ to the existing area.

A strategic pipeline of precinct-scaled redevelopment on public housing land also increases the feasibility of implementing higher

cost innovations, such as modular/pre-fabricated construction or expanded services networks (e.g. renewable energy generation or water capture and re-use) incorporating residential and non-residential properties, within and outside the precinct.

### ***Planning***

- Precinct-scale development plans in greyfield locations would enable long-term, place-specific affordable housing strategies to be aligned with broader urban regeneration initiatives. The integrated design approach at a neighbourhood level maximises the overlap of benefits for stakeholders within and outside the proposed precinct.
- ‘Blanket’ planning controls, such as standardised setbacks and parking provisions, can limit site-specific design opportunities. More flexible planning tools could substantially improve the quality, viability and yields achieved by medium-density infill housing.

### ***Long-term viability of precinct-based development***

- More applied research into the long-term value of redevelopment, the efficacy of public investment and the best use of existing public housing assets is needed. Typical dual-occupancy redevelopment is not an economically viable or sustainable solution in greyfield locations in the longer term. However, the short-term feasibility of delivering medium-density housing in low value suburbs (i.e. areas with poor employment or transport) is a continuing barrier for precinct-scaled approaches.
- The collective portfolio of public housing stock provides a unique opportunity to cross subsidise development between areas of high and low underlying land value.
- Precinct redevelopment of dispersed public housing stock could catalyse urban uplift (physical, social and financial) and the cultural change necessary to transition to more sustainable neighbourhoods in the long term.
- Precinct redevelopment could undermine affordability if the inevitable gentrification of

greyfield suburbs is driven by short-term profitability alone. Equitable and affordable infill outcomes will require the involvement of community housing providers, who have a long-term interest in the quality and sustainability of new housing solutions.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

### **Public housing asset renewal and stock transfer**

A growing proportion of public housing stock is in need of upgrade and renewal. In a context of declining rental income, increased management costs and reduced public investment in the direct provision of housing, Australian state governments are exploring strategies of asset divestment, stock transfer and leveraging private investment to help fund renewal.

Continuing a program of asset renewal that has focused on larger inner urban estates, public housing agencies are now looking at the more dispersed low and medium-density stock in middle suburban locations. This different form of housing and pattern of land holdings presents an opportunity for alternative asset planning and renewal strategies to deliver the broadest range of public benefits. This strategic research highlights the opportunity for achieving the most from these state assets while providing a stimulus for positive on-going change.

### **Metropolitan strategic planning**

Most metropolitan strategic plans and policies for state capital cities include ambitions (and sometimes targets) for the intensification of established areas to increase housing supply and improve urban efficiencies. However, implementation in middle suburban contexts can be especially difficult, due either to local opposition or insufficient consolidated land.

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Precinct-scaled, design-led intensification in greyfield suburbs will be necessary to achieve consolidation targets sustainably. Clusters of dispersed residential land holdings in single ownership, such as those held by state housing agencies, can be used to initiate this type of transformation and stimulate its wider replication by the private sector.

### **Whole-of-government strategic asset management**

When considered strategically, and from a whole-of-government policy perspective, public housing assets that have become a liability due to the need for renewal might be used to deliver a range of objectives beyond their original use, while also continuing to provide social housing.

Strategic asset management across portfolios, coupled with design-led planning, has the potential to help governments meet a range of complex urban policy needs more efficiently while extracting greatest value from assets already held.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 52012, *Processes for developing affordable and sustainable medium-density housing models for greyfield precincts*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: [www.ahuri.edu.au](http://www.ahuri.edu.au) or by contacting AHURI Limited on +61 3 9660 2300.



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