

Australian Indigenous housing research: a review and audit

THE EVIDENCE BASE AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT POLICY REFORM IN INDIGENOUS HOUSING IS CONSIDERABLE. A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY FIELD OF STUDY HAS, SINCE THE 1970S, ESTABLISHED KNOWLEDGE OF HOUSING DESIGN, HOUSING MANAGEMENT, THE OCCUPATION AND USE OF HOUSING, HOME OWNERSHIP, AND HOUSING AND WELL-BEING.

KEY POINTS

- The thematic foci of Australian Indigenous housing literature are: housing design, the nature of occupation and use of housing, housing management, home ownership, and the links between housing and a range of well-being outcomes, for example, health.
- The thematic gaps of Australian Indigenous housing literature are: the sustainability of Indigenous housing and living environments, Indigenous control of housing provision, comparison of Indigenous and mainstream housing outcomes, the housing pathways and preferences of Indigenous people, and the links between demographic change and housing outcomes.
- The characteristics of Australian Indigenous housing research are that it is: multi-disciplinary; multi-method; focussed on remote locations, and; that Indigenous people have played an important role in the conduct of the research as participants and research assistants.
- Research conducted between 1970 and 2000 is characterised by a focus on matters internal to particular living environments, such as cooking activities and sleeping arrangements – that is, the activities of individuals and households.
- Research from 2000 to 2006 also considers matters that range across individual living environments – that is, activities across regions and states and at the national level.

*This bulletin is based on research by **Dr Stephen Long, Associate Professor Paul Memmott and Dr Tim Seelig**, of the AHURI Queensland Research Centre. The project is a comprehensive audit and review of Indigenous housing research in Australia*



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METHODOLOGY

'Indigenous housing' encompasses all aspects of the production, management, maintenance and occupation of Indigenous living environments.

The project consisted of a major review and audit of the Australian Indigenous housing literature between 1970 and 2006 to provide a resource guide for researchers and policy makers regarding the coverage of available literature.

The literature was examined in three ways:

1. A meta-analysis of existing literature reviews of the Australian Indigenous housing literature published between 1970 and 1999 compared and contrasted findings.
2. The Australian Indigenous housing literature published after 2000 was collated and the characteristics and key themes of the publications analysed.
3. A small sample of the recent Indigenous housing literature in Canada, the United States and New Zealand was analysed for comparable themes.

Thematic foci of the literature

Indigenous housing design – and occupation and use of housing

This theme emerges as a research focus from the early 1970s. The action research of architects combined with the research of anthropologists has made a significant contribution to these themes and ensured their strong representation in the literature through to the present. The significance of culturally appropriate design and the importance of understanding Indigenous patterns of occupation and use of housing are also emphasised in the international Indigenous housing literature (Memmott 1989; Morel & Ross 1993).

Housing management

Over 30 per cent of the literature reviewed from 2000 to 2006 was concerned with housing management. Reviews of housing management practice first emerged in the 1980s when Memmott (1988) documented the activities of the Tangentyere Council in Alice Springs, with its multiple set of housing services being recognised as a benchmark of the time. In the early 1990s, research (Memmott 1991; Morel & Ross 1993) examined housing maintenance and rent issues. Since 2000 Australian literature has examined Indigenous community control of housing assets (Burke 2004; Jardine Orr 2004; Neutze

2000), the evaluation of housing management (Rogers et al 2005), housing management training (Parnell and Seemann 2005), sustaining tenancies (Flatau et al 2005), asset management (Sally 2003), and the financial viability of different housing management models (Hall and Berry 2006).

Home ownership

Around 7% of the post-2000 literature reviewed included the theme of ownership. The rate of home ownership (Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2001) and the affordability of home ownership (Neutze 2000) are both used as indicators of housing need.

Most recently the issue of home ownership on community title land has been examined. Moran et al (2001; 2002) investigate the prospects for home ownership on community title land in Queensland, where they interviewed householders in four discrete settlements. Sanders (2005:1–19) argues that the socio-economic differences between remote and settled Australia mean that it is unrealistic to attempt to transpose the housing tenure system of settled Australia to remote Indigenous Australia.

Indigenous housing performance

Approximately 16% of the post-2000 literature focuses on the theme of the performance of Indigenous housing – including work on housing indicators (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005b), post-occupancy evaluations of the suitability of housing in relation to the residents' needs (Memmott et al 2000), and technical appraisals of the design performance of particular features of housing (Runcie & Baillie 2000).

Housing and well-being

One area where Indigenous housing research has been leading the way over the past couple of decades concerns the relationships and connections between housing/shelter and non-housing/shelter outcomes. Around 9 per cent of the 2000–2006 Indigenous housing literature reviewed was categorised as including the theme of 'linking housing and other (non-housing/shelter) services and outcomes'. Around half of such literature linked housing with health outcomes (Harris 2000; Runcie & Baillie 2000; Trewin & Madden 2003).

Work has also examined the relationship between access to housing and access to health services for people who migrate from remote communities to major urban areas (Walker & Ireland 2003). Links have been made between

Indigenous rates of home ownership and employment status (Sanders 2005). Publications also highlight the potential for the Indigenous housing industry, particularly in remote and very remote Australia, to provide significant employment and capacity-building opportunities for Indigenous people (see Jardine-Orr 2004; SGS Economics & Planning 2004; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005a:75). Memmott et al (2006) identified a relationship between housing and Indigenous access to secondary education in remote and very remote Australia.

Thematic gaps in the literature

In comparison with the general housing studies literature, and given current Indigenous housing policy priorities, apparent gaps in the Indigenous housing literature include:

- the sustainability of Indigenous housing and living environments, whereby economic, socio-cultural and environmental concerns are considered in an integrated manner
- systematic comparisons of Indigenous and population-wide housing outcomes
- the housing pathways and preferences of Indigenous people
- the links between demographic change and housing outcomes.

Any further research to be conducted on these topics will benefit from an appreciation of the cross-cultural context in which Indigenous housing exists and thereby be specific, sensitive to, and respectful of the needs of Indigenous people.

Further research will also benefit from a theoretical foundation beyond 'housing' that takes 'living environments' as its departure point. The latter will more readily take account of the lives of Indigenous people.

Characteristics of the literature

Disciplines

A number of disciplines have contributed to the Australian Indigenous housing literature. Authors identified with the disciplines of architecture, anthropology, economics and public health. This picture contrasts with non-Indigenous housing research, which is dominated by the disciplines of sociology, economics, urban geography and planning.

A number of authors have developed cross-disciplinary

research approaches – for example, anthropology and architecture, illness prevention and architecture, anthropology and environmental psychology. This multi- and cross-disciplinary characteristic reflects the complex nature of the topic; Indigenous housing research involves multiple interrelated themes and sub-themes.

Participation by Indigenous people

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders have provided a significant contribution to the literature as research assistants and as research participants. However, although Indigenous people have contributed in this way, relatively few Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people were identified as authors of research in the public domain.

Range of methods

A range of methods are used in Indigenous housing research, although the research has tended towards qualitative, practice-based, or action research. In many cases this has involved reflection on practice rather than systematic academic research.

Geographic focus

The Indigenous housing literature is characterised by a consistent geographic focus. Throughout, the research has focused on remote and very remote Australia. It has also focussed on discrete settlements. A number of settlement types have not received sufficient coverage in the literature, in particular urban Indigenous settlements.

Cross-cultural commonalities

The literature has focussed on Aboriginal Australia, and the housing needs and circumstances of Torres Strait Islanders have largely been neglected. Within the focus on Aboriginal Australians the literature has focussed on a small number of language groups, typically in Central Australia. There is an implicit assumption that Indigenous Australia is culturally homogeneous.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 20281, *An audit and review of local and international Indigenous housing research*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au

The following document is available:

- Final Report

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300

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