

Safe and stable housing for all

A new property development in North Fremantle, Western Australia, shows us how contemporary housing can be designed collaboratively, built sustainably and costed affordably for all who need it. Jodie Lea Martire reports.

The “My Home” Australasia project, due to open in the new year, will convert railway-reserve land into a site for social housing, specifically for 18 women aged over 55 who are experiencing homelessness. According to founder and chair Michelle Blakeley, “My Home” aims “to provide safe, secure, affordable housing for people who are homeless.” As she explains, “We always work on Housing First principles which, as the name implies, gives people a home—then helps residents get back on their feet with whatever support services they need.”

Michelle is the director of her own Perth-based architecture practice, and “My Home” is her brainchild; she is both its founder and its chair. “My Home” is a company limited by guarantee which works as a philanthropic developer. It coordinates public-private partnerships (PPP) pro-bono to alleviate the urgent need for longer-term housing for homeless people or those at risk of homelessness. Homeless people can receive permanent, low-cost housing and call “My Home” forever or until they are self-sufficient. The project unites the efforts of government, church, private housing and community housing providers to address the wicked problem of supplying affordable, environmentally friendly homes in an ongoing housing crisis.

The first inspiration for “My Home” came in 2019, when Michelle read about the Launch Housing project in Melbourne’s west, funded by the Harris Family Foundation (of

Flight Centre fame). On six plots of Victorian government land, Launch developed 47 architecturally-designed, transportable tiny homes for people experiencing homelessness. On the terms of the peppercorn lease, tenants would have stable housing for at least 10 years (see our coverage in *Renew* 149.)

“I read this,” Michelle remembers, “and thought, ‘That’s such a simple no-brainer.’ Government provides land, the private sector provides funding for construction. We’re not putting our hand out and asking for money from the government.” A walk from Northbridge to the Perth CBD later that day, passing so many homeless people in the empty William St shopfronts, cemented her idea: Michelle knew “we could really do this in WA.”

Three years later, “My Home” is putting the finishing touches on a sustainable housing development constructed on land owned by the Public Transport Authority of Western Australia (PTA). The new tenants are due to move into their eco-homes in

February, and this proof-of-concept project has been so successful that at least four further developments are planned on the same principles. Not to mention the fact that the North Freo project was shortlisted for the 2022 SHC Solar Award. This prize is granted by the International Energy Agency Solar Heating and Cooling (IEA SHC) Programme in recognition of outstanding leadership or achievements in the field of solar heating and cooling. Unfortunately, on this occasion, the project was unsuccessful.

Each one-bedroom home in the development has a 31m² footprint, plus a north-facing 11m² front veranda which uses six solar panels as its roof. Raked ceilings up to 3.2m high give a feeling of openness, while internal circulation spaces in the bedroom, bathroom and doorways meet Livable Housing Australia’s Gold Standard.

The single-storey dwellings feature double-glazed UPVC windows and an adjoining 2000L rainwater tank. Construction and transport costs are kept

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Architectural render of one of the units, with water tank and solar panels.

down by using prefabricated, fully-insulated, timber-frame cassettes for floors, ceilings and internal and external walls.

"The structural panels are delivered like an Ikea flat-pack and each house can be erected in three hours," says Michelle. "You stand them up on the footings and they're basically ready for the builder to come in and complete the build." At that point, the roof sheeting goes on and those houses are at lock-up stage, ready for the electrician, plumber, painter and cabinetmaker to finish off the job. The houses can even be dismantled and moved to another site if necessary.

The project is being built by Highbury Homes, the solar provider is Positive Energy, and OFFSITE is making the prefab panels at its Kewdale factory. Padraic Mellett, OFFSITE's founder and director, shares some details: "We've been making them off the main production line because they're a really odd shape. We'll erect two or three of these houses in a day, 13 days to lift 18 units—pretty cool."

"We're using Passivhaus principles," says Padraic. "This makes it much more cost-effective to operate the houses, and benefits the target people who are living there, on low or no incomes." The "My Home" houses have been designed to near-Passivhaus standards, as official certification is a costly undertaking for this low-cost project. Several

elements in the eight timber panels help Offsite reach this standard.

German building-envelope company Pro Clima makes a high-performance weather membrane called Extasana, which is sealed to the outside of every door and window frame and back onto each timber frame. "Think of it as an expensive Goretex mountain jacket—hi-tech fibre that basically stops the driving rain and wind from coming in, but allows water vapour to leave through its permeable, non-porous layer," Padraic says. "This is Goretex for houses."

Cavity water-draining battens are nailed outside the Extasana, then covered in cladding. This makes two weather-resistant layers, and any wind-driven water can escape via the cavity's draining pane. The wall cavity is then filled with high-performance glass-wool insulation batts (R2.7), the highest-standard product for residential properties. Pro Clima's airtight Intello membrane is taped internally to the wall frame, window frames, and the frame edges with the Extasana (all of this tape has a 100-year adhesion warranty).

Finally, to keep the air flowing in this sealed environment, an energy recovery ventilation system is installed that eliminates the need for heating or cooling. In summer and winter, 24/7, this system pulls in fresh air from outside and sends out stale air from the kitchen and



The units were assembled from prefabricated panels, making for rapid assembly on-site.

bathroom. The two air flows run through a heat exchanger, separated by a membrane, and thus bring in cool or hot air from outside to maintain a liveable temperature. “Think of an esky in summer, full of ice, and the difference between having a tightly shut lid and an open lid,” Padraic explains. “Same principle.” In spring or autumn, as the mercury indoors will naturally be more pleasant, fresh and stale air are still cycled but not much energy exchanged.

“Residents will have no power bills because of the solar, and there is no air-conditioning because we’re using a heat-exchange system that uses the same amount of energy as one LED downlight,” adds Michelle. “For this cohort, this is really important to reduce living costs—we worked through this process carefully.”

The development site covers 1722m² bordered by Congdon St and the Stirling Highway, with a location that puts tenants within short walking distance of trains and buses to Fremantle and Perth, and shops just up the highway. The property will include shared storage and parking bays, and be landscaped with vegetable gardens, fruit trees and outdoor living areas.

A demo house has already been constructed on OFFSITE’s

premises. Michelle reports, “A lot of government ministers, community housing representatives, directors of government departments, heads of large corporations, private funders, and community organisations such as Rotary have visited the demo house.” As she explains, showing off the model home “has been very, very useful, because often people assume our houses are just a basic transportable.”

Those visitors indicate just some of the collaborators who have made this dream a reality. Michelle spoke to both the former WA government architect, Geoff Warn, and the chair of the WA Planning Commission, David Caddy, who, she says, “fortunately thought it was a great idea and understood its potential.” Five vacant government lots were originally identified, which have resulted in land for two developments.

Funding has come from Lotterywest, which contributed \$2.2 million, while Minderoo Foundation provided \$500,000 and the Sisters of St John of God backed contingency costs. Rotary WA has offered support in establishing on-site gardens and in coordinating furniture, linens and household items for the new tenants—the furniture is sitting in storage at Stirling Adriatic Club even as I type.

The City of Fremantle approved the project in 2020 and has since waived planning application fees and building license fees, and St Patrick's Community Support Centre will provide support services, alongside other community support services. St Pat's, as it's affectionately known, will lease the land from PTA's sub-lessor, the WA Department of Communities. (The lease is for 10 years plus a roll-over option, because of the need for future government approvals.)

"My Home" has also publicly thanked "all the suppliers who have provided materials and products gratis or at incredibly discounted cost". It takes a village to raise a social-housing development.

The design process is another manifestation of this rich collaboration. A think tank comprising Michelle Blakeley, the project manager (Ben Martin), structural engineers, OFFSITE and some local suppliers have worked through a dozen or so designs for the footprint under construction in North Fremantle. Over three meetings, they worked to answer the question: "What is the most cost-efficient design?" Four builders priced the construction of one house, with all quotes coming in within 10% of each other. Michelle judged that to be "a good test that showed we were on the right track."

"Brian Guinan, from iSmart Construction, was incredibly helpful in sharing his knowledge of Passivhaus design which he had worked to in Europe," says Michelle.

Highbury Homes was the successful

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builder, then "their estimator did an excellent job of getting amazing rates from suppliers and trades. The whole process has taken three years; unfortunately, dealing with government departments takes that long." Michelle muses, "The think-tank idea was probably the best thing we could have done. Those people come on board and take ownership of the project."

Kathleen Gregory, the organisational development manager of St Patrick's and formerly the CEO of Foundation Housing, explains more about the collaboration between "My Home" and St Patrick's: "St Pat's has a really long history, and a good reputation as one of the key agencies providing services to people experiencing homelessness in the south-west metro region of Perth." This, she says, "was a key factor in attracting funding through Lotterywest, Minderoo and the Sisters of St John of God.

"My Home" was a start-up, a new model that hadn't been proven yet, so St Pat's being a partner was an important factor in attracting the funding for this first "My Home" project."

The rental income from the homes will cover the costs associated with property and tenancy management, which St Pat's is also coordinating. Rent will be set at an affordable proportion of each woman's income (25%), and other support can include assistance with finances, mental and physical health, and training or re-training. The organisation has been operating in Fremantle for 50 years, providing outreach, emergency relief, short-term accommodation, community housing and advocacy to locals experiencing homelessness. Kathleen goes on, "St Pat's is relatively well-funded, never enough but relatively well-funded, to provide a range of services for people experiencing homelessness. "My Home" creates the housing supply to amplify the effectiveness of those funded services."

The "My Home" development also helps realise the state target of increasing social housing by 6% before 2030, as laid out in WA's 10 Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030. The strategy also enshrines the "Housing First" principle—first house homeless people, then work to resolve their complex needs so they can become self-sufficient—which the North Fremantle project is designed to support. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute reported in August this year that between 66% and 90% of Housing First beneficiaries retained and funded their housing for up to six years (according to the period of each research study), a significant improvement compared to those in "treatment as usual" programs.

Kathleen says that St Pat's long-running work in Fremantle means that it sees "hundreds of people per year who need



Michelle Blakeley, Founder and Chair of "My Home", on the veranda of one of the partly-assembled units.

FEATURE

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help.” One of St Patrick’s key programs since COVID has been Library Connect, which runs in different Fremantle libraries to provide information and service linkages to “connect with a cohort of people who had recently become homeless but wouldn’t traditionally engage with existing services.” The selection process for the North Fremantle site hasn’t been finalised, but as Kathleen reports, “We know that there are a lot of women who meet the criteria for North Fremantle.”

Distressingly, an increasing number of women who have retired or are nearing retirement are finding themselves at risk of homelessness. This is the fastest-growing demographic among Australia’s homeless population, as a lifetime of gender inequality gives women lower incomes and superannuation, higher periods of unemployment due to caring responsibilities, and lower rates of home ownership. In an economy built around the principle of home ownership, Anglicare’s Rental Affordability Snapshot 2022 showed that only 975 rentals were affordable for couples or singles on the aged pension—and that’s out of nearly 46,000 advertised properties.

It won’t be until next year that we learn the 2021 Census data on homelessness, but the number of homeless people over 55 has increased in each census since 2006, and COVID’s impacts have led to “tent cities” of the homeless in Perth and Fremantle. Older homeless women numbered 6866 nationwide in the 2016 census, a 31% increase on the 2011 results, while the social housing waitlist topped 164,000 people in 2021. These are not statistics Australia can be proud of.

One woman who has experienced precarious housing in her older years is Melbourne resident Sue Leigh, now 81 and formerly a community worker in women’s services. She says that in her time in private rentals on a limited income, “I never knew if the landlord was going to increase the rent or end my tenancy. The flats were always cold in winter and hot in summer.”

It was only after long searching and waiting that Sue was allocated accommodation in her current apartment, which operates under a now-eliminated federal plan, the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS). It is a private rental managed and discounted by Women’s Property Initiative. Sue explains, “This has provided me with stable, secure housing at 30% of my income.” She specifically notes that the air-conditioning, heating, double-glazing,

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balcony, elevators and proximity to shops and transport are “all important factors as I become less mobile”.

Sue doesn’t just understand the housing situation as a tenant: she also advocated for housing rights for many years with the Housing for the Aged Action Group. HAAG is based in Melbourne but services the housing needs of all older Australians. It tenaciously seeks social or public accommodation options for older people in housing stress through its Home at Last service, as well as helping them with removal expenses and white goods.

Based on her knowledge and experiences, and despite her own forever home in social housing, Sue urges, “What is needed is a strong commitment from government to a massive building program of public housing, which must be accompanied by a similar commitment to maintain that housing. Both state and federal governments regard public housing as accommodation for the

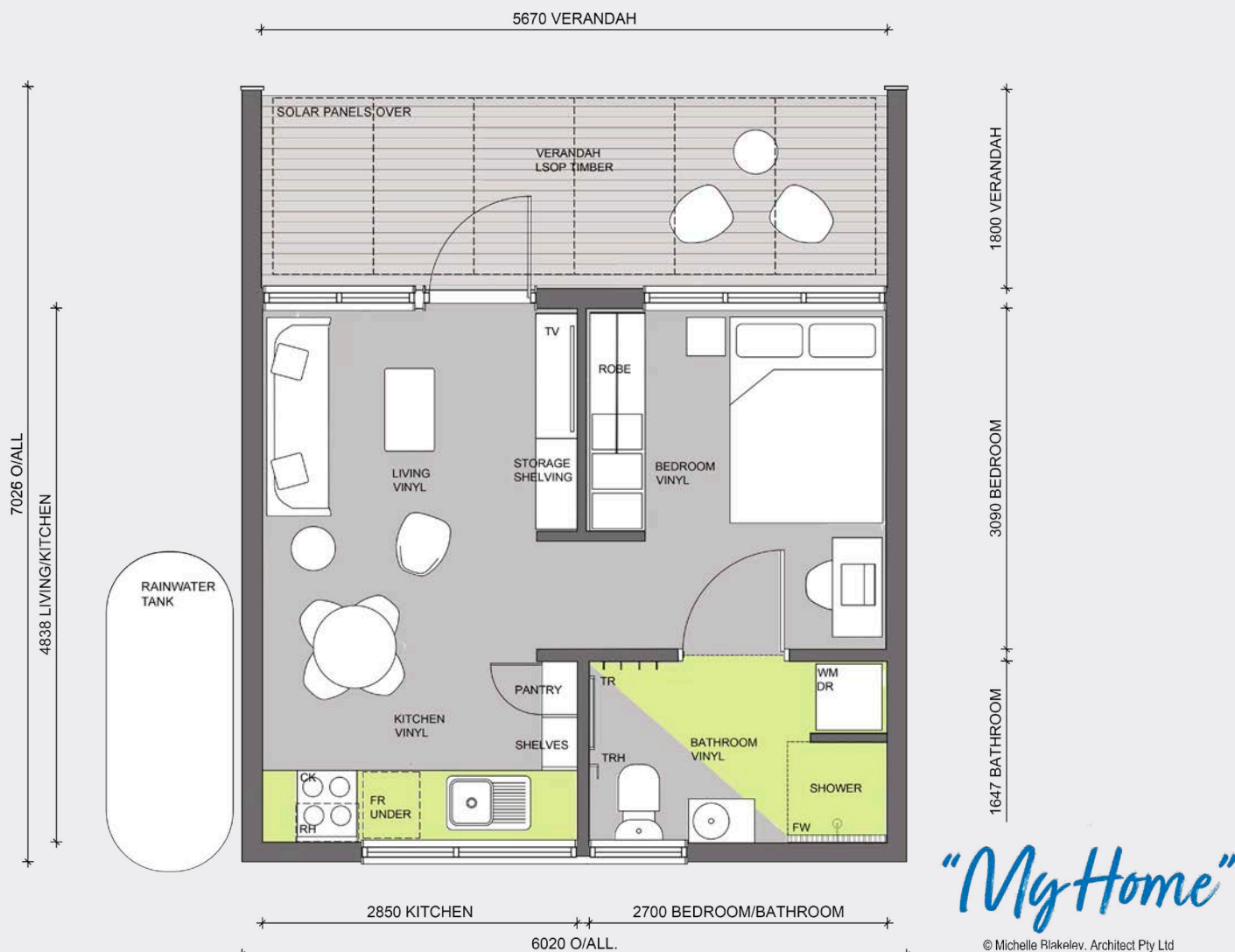
marginalised rather than as a right for all those in need of affordable, secure housing.”

This echoes the words of the Australian Human Rights Commission: “Homeless people are not merely objects of charity, seeking help and compassion—like all Australians, they are individuals *entitled* to the protection and promotion of their human rights” (their italics). Sue also warns that social housing can charge higher rents than public housing (30% vs 25%) and doesn’t offer the same security of tenure (the WA Housing Strategy on Homelessness notes no plans for public housing, but mentions “social housing” 51 times).

Michelle Blakeley emphasises the benefits of the PPP model used by “My Home”, noting that with some of its projects on state government land, it is possible to bypass local government planning processes (although local government can also approve and support the project). With WA Planning



The site was just a standard suburban residential block.



Floorplan of one of the units. Wet areas are clustered at the back of the unit to keep pipe runs short, while living areas make best use of winter sun.

Commission approval, there's also no need to comply with the state's R codes—residential design codes—as the project isn't on zoned residential land.

Kathleen Gregory of St Pat's notes, "The beauty of this model is that it doesn't need legislative changes to make it happen. It just needs the willingness of local and state governments to embrace the concept of how to utilise unused land for short- to medium-term purpose."

OFFSITE's Padraic Mellett, however, points out the environmental and residential benefits that can result from state and federal building commissions recognising international eco-standards like the Passivhaus energy assessment, just as the NSW Building Commission has done for the last year or so. As of May 2023, the Nationwide House Energy Rating Scheme (NatHERS) benchmark for all new Australian housing is 7 Stars, but Padraic says the best rating achieved by one of OFFSITE's certified

Passivhauses, in White Gum Valley, is 9.2 stars. The benefits to residents and the planet are obvious.

Regardless of existing shortfalls in housing policy and practice, "It's great to get the first project up and running as proof of concept in WA," says Kathleen. That trial run has clearly paid off for "My Home", as a second project is underway in Dianella on land owned by the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth. This development will include 40 social housing dwellings open to a mix of tenants (homeless people, those wait-listed for public housing, single parents, unemployed or low-income residents, or elderly folks wishing to age in place).

A third project, five homes in East Victoria Park, has also been approved for development on a state-owned quarter-acre block. This will provide dwellings for people experiencing homelessness, while two other mixed sites have been identified in Armadale (48 homes) and Mundijong (12 homes). For all these

developments, updated WA Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage laws mean that any single-occupier dwellings would be 36m², the new minimum size for a studio.

And "My Home" has thrown down the gauntlet on the rarest and most expensive element in this housing initiative: land. As its website says, "The 'My Home' project is live. As long as the government or other landowners provide us with land, we will continue to build houses across Western Australia." And for too many Western Australians, that stable, sustainable housing can't come soon enough. ■

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