

# chain reaction

Issue #145

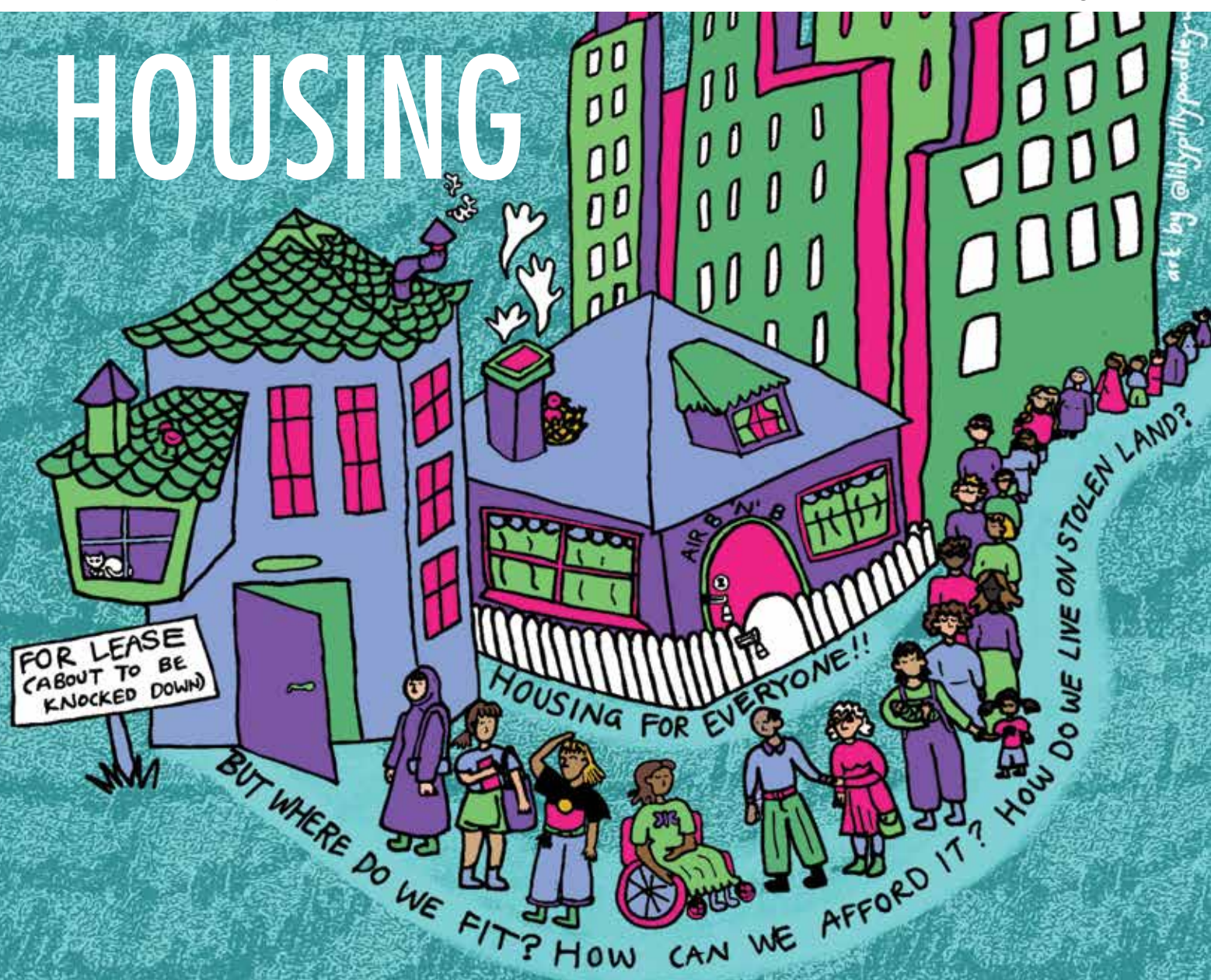
May 2023

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The National Magazine of Friends of the Earth Australia

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## HOUSING



Older People and the Housing Crisis

It's Time for a Housing Disruption

Racism & The Housing Crisis of the  
Central Deserts and Northern Territory

"Here Lies Public Housing"

Rewilding the Urban Soul

Landlords and Redistribution





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**Front cover**

Lily Longman, @lilypillypoodleyworm

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### Editor's Note

We live in a time of precarious housing, whether that's the property & rental market, "private property" perpetuating colonisation, increasing extreme weather events, or the need to find sustainable housing solutions. And all this is just from the human-perspective – imagine the challenge animals and plants are having in finding and creating homes right now... This edition showcases some of these struggles, and invites us to consider creative ways to live in safe, connected ways.

**As always, get in touch to join the CR Collective or contribute articles/artwork!**

**Email** [chainreaction@foe.org.au](mailto:chainreaction@foe.org.au).



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Friends of the Earth (FoE) Australia is a federation of independent local groups. Join FoEA today, sign up to our monthly newsletters, or donate!



## Dirty and Dark – political donations from the fossil fuel industry

The Australian Government continues to support fossil fuel exploration and development in Australia, despite modelling by the International Energy Agency (IEA), which finds that there can be no new coal, oil or gas projects if the world is to achieve zero net emissions by 2050 and limit global warming to 1.5°C.

Since 2021, six new coal mining projects were approved prior to the ousting of the former Liberal-National government. The incumbent Labor government has granted 10 new oil and gas exploration licences since, even while its own Climate Change Bill enshrines in law a 43% reduction in Australia's emissions by 2030. So why do all three major political parties continue to back the fossil fuel industry at the risk of catastrophic climate change?

In FY2022, fossil fuel companies donated \$2 million to the ALP, Liberal and National parties. Leading the pack with \$188,000 was Mineral Resources, followed by INPEX with \$157,300 and Santos with \$153,660. Fossil fuel lobby groups like the Minerals Council of Australia and the Australian Petroleum Production & Exploration Association (APPEA) also donated nearly half a million dollars.

*Read more:* [marketforces.org.au/politicaldonations2023](https://marketforces.org.au/politicaldonations2023)

**"Climate-related disasters have been a salient feature of Australian life in recent years. Research like ours helps to understand the long-term harm this has on our society's health and who are the most vulnerable and in need of support."**

Co-Author Mathew Toll, University of Melbourne

## New research: Health trajectories following climate-related disasters

Climate change is the biggest health threat of our time. New research has mapped out short and long-term mental and physical health trajectories for those exposed to climate-related disaster. Research co-author Mathew Toll from the University of Melbourne says "Being aware about the very real impacts of climate change on human health can spur mitigation efforts and knowing about vulnerability within the community is needed for any efforts to increase our resilience in a changed climate."

### Key Findings:

- People exposed to disaster experienced low health impacts.
- One fifth experienced large health decreases and slow recovery post-disaster.
- Pre-disaster poor health increased risk for severe physical impacts by 51%.
- Pre-disaster poor health increased risk for severe mental impacts by 61%.

Adaptation to climate-related disasters requires understanding prior vulnerability. This paper is a start to action climate disaster resilience.

*Read the full paper:* [healthyfutures.net.au/research\\_healthtrajectories](https://healthyfutures.net.au/research_healthtrajectories)



## Barngarla People were excluded from the right to vote in a community ballot about the nuclear facility on their own country.

**SUPPORT  
& SIGN**



### Court case: Barngarla Traditional Owners' vs proposed nuclear Waste Dump

March 6th-10<sup>th</sup> 2023 will see the court case on the judicial challenge The Barngarla Traditional Owners against the Federal government over the proposed nuclear waste dump on their land. The Federal government is spending millions of dollars fighting Traditional Custodians over their right to be heard. The Barngarla People were excluded from the right to vote in a community ballot about the nuclear facility in their own country. Here are some things that you can do to support:

- Read: 'Barngarla People and the National Radioactive Waste Facility' briefing paper - [foe.org.au/cr145f](https://foe.org.au/cr145f)
- Sign: Mahalia Bilney launched a new Change.org petition - please sign and share, let's get the numbers up! [foe.org.au/cr145g](https://foe.org.au/cr145g)
- Watch: Informative videos by Kim Mavramatis on Vimeo
- Follow: Facebook page - Barngarla: Help us Have a Say on Kimba
- Donate: to help cover legal costs - [foe.org.au/cr145h](https://foe.org.au/cr145h)

### Victoria's Offshore Wind Implementation

The Victorian government recently released its second Offshore Wind Implementation Statement and set a goal to begin procurement by 2025.

Key updates:

1. The Port of Hastings has been identified as preferred site for the Victorian Renewable Energy Terminal. The government is aiming to enable construction of 1GW generation capacity per year.
2. Renewable energy supply chain hubs will be built near offshore wind areas with local content requirements applied. Workforce planning will begin this year.
3. VicGrid will lead on transmission, confirm connection points and transmission corridors by end of year after consultation.
4. A competitive procurement process for offshore wind is set to begin in 2025.

It's essential that these initiatives are matched with best practise planning for marine ecosystems. Friends of the Earth will be following developments and engaging closely with state and federal governments to secure a good outcome for people and planet.

Read the full statement: [melbournefoe.org.au/vicoffshorewindstatement2](https://melbournefoe.org.au/vicoffshorewindstatement2)

### Methane Gas Emissions Wildly Underestimated

A slew of unmeasured methane leaks from platforms and pipelines off Australia's coast have released large amounts of the dangerous greenhouse gas into the atmosphere. Methane, which is otherwise known euphemistically as "natural gas," is more than 80 times worse than carbon dioxide for global warming. The most recent case was at Santos' John Brookes platform off Karratha, which was shut down by the industry regulator after a dangerous methane leak.

Now a new study from Princeton University and Colorado State University has shown that current methods for estimating methane emissions from offshore oil and gas production severely underestimates gas released by the offshore fossil fuel industry. "This US study should ring very loud alarm bells here in Australia as well," FoEA Offshore Fossil Gas Campaigner Jeff Waters, said. "Governments need to heed this warning and start measuring our emissions more adequately, and someone — anyone — needs to stop the industry from flagrantly polluting our air with their venting, flaring, and worst of all, their leaks."

Join the Offshore Fossil Gas Campaign: [jeff.waters@foe.org.au](mailto:jeff.waters@foe.org.au)

Read More: [foe.org.au/methane\\_gas\\_leaks\\_wildly\\_underestimated](https://foe.org.au/methane_gas_leaks_wildly_underestimated)



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**FoE International's web radio station**  
(in five languages): <https://rnr.fm/>

Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) is a federation of autonomous organisations from all over the world. Our members, in over 70 countries, campaign on the most urgent environmental and social issues, while working towards sustainable societies. FoEI currently has five international programs: Climate Justice and Energy; Economic Justice, Resisting Neoliberalism; Food Sovereignty; Forests and Biodiversity; and Resisting Mining, Oil and Gas.



## EU Commission pushes EU-Mercosur deal despite highest deforestation levels ever.

New data reveals that deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon reached its worst-ever February level. Despite this rampant devastation, and with the Amazon likely at an irreversible environmental tipping point, the European Union continues to push for a free trade agreement with the South American economic bloc Mercosur, which would increase the pressure on the region.

"The data is shockingly clear. (This is an) ... inherently climate-wrecking deal which aims to increase trade of products that drive deforestation and GHG emissions," said Audrey Changoe, trade campaigner at Friends of the Earth Europe. Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon grew by almost 60% in the last four years, 26% of the forest shows severe signs of degradation, while 20% has already suffered irreversible losses.

Three-quarters of Europeans want the deal to be scrapped if it leads to deforestation and environmental damage.

*Read more:* [foe.org.au/cr145c](https://foe.org.au/cr145c)

## Study urges new law for energy transition metals in Philippines

A new study by the Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center (LRC) found that new mining laws are needed to regulate the management of strategic minerals for transition to renewable energy. "... (it will need to balance) ... the need for minerals with environmental, social, and economic considerations. The bill is anchored in climate justice and rationalizes mining under a national framework, where only strategic minerals will be mined," said Maya Quirino, Advocacy Coordinator of LRC.

Transition metals currently produced in the Philippines include chromium, cobalt, copper, nickel and silver; all necessary for the production of renewable energy technology. In 2020, the Philippines was the second biggest producer of nickel in the world at 14% of total supply. It is also the world's fourth largest copper and cobalt reserve.

The study makes note of the current mining policy, which has resulted in 60% of all mineral reserves and 49% of all mining projects being in conflict with ancestral domains. It additionally cited various reports where the extractives sector was linked to a third up to half of cases of environmental defender killings.

The study also noted the need for a policy framework on Just Minerals Transition, based on social wellbeing and within ecological limits; governance of minerals is democratized where affected communities ultimately decide; circularity of minerals through recycling; and due diligence mechanisms for holding mineral sources accountable are in place.

*Read more:* [foe.org.au/cr145e](https://foe.org.au/cr145e)

## The importance of a loss and damage fund for coastal communities in Indonesia

In November 2022, the 27th Conference of Parties (COP) was held in Egypt. World leaders, climate groups and activists met to discuss plans to safeguard the planet's future.

The Friends of the Earth Indonesia (WALHI) were active in various civil society forums, discussing how to achieve climate justice for countries like Indonesia. Indonesia (among other third world countries) has experienced disproportionate and unfair impacts of the climate crisis while contributing the least amount of global emissions compared to rich countries in the global North.

COP27 agreed to establish a loss and damage fund to compensate developing countries (like Indonesia) for the irreversible impacts of climate change. This was despite consistent efforts by the US and other developed countries to derail it.

“Coastal villages in Indonesia are already sinking. For example, 11% of the Pari Island's surface has already submerged into the sea. In addition to sea level rise, it's estimated as many as 199 cities or regencies located in coastal areas in Indonesia will be affected by tidal floods annually by 2050.” Parid Ridwanuddin, Campaign Manager for Coastal and Marine of WALHI/Friend of the Earth (FoE).

The challenge to fairly set up a loss and damage fund is enormous. The mechanism for channelling these funds will be decided at next year's COP 28 in the United Arab Emirates.

*Read more:* [foe.org.au/cr145d](https://foe.org.au/cr145d)



## Four Indonesians file climate litigation against Holcim

Aid agencies and environment groups, including Friends of the Earth Indonesia (WALHI), are supporting climate litigation against Swiss cement company Holcim, initiated by four residents on the island of Pari, on behalf of the entire island. The campaign is known as the Call for Climate Justice.

The residents fear that their existence is under threat, and so are demanding compensation for climate damages suffered, a financial contribution to flood-protection measures, as well as the rapid reduction of Holcim's CO2 emissions.

The Swiss company must answer for its role in contributing to climate change in court. In a new analysis on Holcim's

climate strategy, the company is shown to be doing too little to reduce its emissions; and its actions come too late.

In July 2022 the four residents of Pari filed an application for conciliation in Zug, Switzerland, the location of Holcim's headquarters. During conciliation proceedings, Holcim made no indication that it was willing to address their concerns. Therefore, on 30 January 2023, the four complainants filed a complaint against the corporation.

The submission of the complaint heralds the first formal civil proceedings in Switzerland against a corporation for its contribution to climate change.

*Read more:* [foe.org.au/cr145a](https://foe.org.au/cr145a)

## UK oil workers demand just energy transition

The UK coalition of offshore oil and gas workers, climate groups and trade unions are backing a new plan to deliver a fair transition away from fossil fuels, protect jobs, communities and climate.

In the face of political inaction, workers are ready to lead. 'Our Power: Offshore oil and gas workers' demand for a just energy transition' is an oil industry first, putting

workers front and centre in a plan for decarbonisation and public ownership.

The list of 10 demands are:

1. A government-backed jobs guarantee
2. An offshore training passport that supports workers to retrain in the renewables sector
3. Investment in ports and renewables manufacturing hubs in the UK, creating and retaining local jobs
4. Full access to union representation and collective negotiation of pay, health and safety regulations and benefits
5. Equal pay for migrant workers and a higher minimum wage for all
6. Trusted grievance and whistleblowing policies and protection from blacklisting
7. Public ownership for public good
8. A permanent 'Energy Excess Profits Tax' and a sovereign wealth fund
9. Polluting companies to pay for the decommissioning of oil rigs
10. Investing wealth in communities and supporting growth in new industries

*Read more:* [foe.org.au/cr145b](https://foe.org.au/cr145b)



# Older People and the Housing Crisis

Fiona York

The housing crisis is disproportionately impacting some of the most disadvantaged people in our society. Despite the media's attempt to pit the generations against each other with "boomer vs millennial" tropes, home ownership in this country is largely determined by intergenerational wealth transfer, rather than age. Yet often, the impact of the housing crisis on older people is hidden from view.

Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG) is a community organization that has been campaigning for housing justice for older people since 1983. We believe in a society where older people have safe, secure and affordable housing, and seek to raise awareness and influence decision makers to improve the housing circumstances of older people. This article will explore the latest research on housing trends for older people.

## Why is private rental unsuitable?

Having a safe, affordable home is the most important factor for health and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

To be able to age in place,<sup>2</sup> older people need to have housing which is affordable, accessible and secure. These elements often do not exist in the private rental markets. Private rental laws vary across the country. In some states, there are still "no grounds" evictions meaning even a "good" renter can be evicted at any time. Short term leases mean that there is no guarantee of staying in private rental long-term. There are no minimum standards for accessibility, meaning that if your mobility decreases as you age, you can't live in many rental houses – for example, houses with stairs, narrow corridors, or showers over baths.

Affordable housing is defined as paying no more than 30% of your income on rent. This is not the case for most people living in private rental on low incomes, who may be paying 90-100% of their income on rent.

## More older people renting

More and more older people are renting, or retiring with a mortgage. Latest research commissioned by HAAG and undertaken by Swinburne, Curtin and Western Sydney Universities examines the 2021 census data,<sup>3</sup> shows:

- Nearly 700, 000 people aged over 55 are renting from private landlords,
- Over half of these people are in the lowest income quintiles
- Over 1.5 million people are either at retirement age, or approaching retirement, without having paid off their mortgage, and many of these people are on the lowest incomes.

Many older renters who are relying on income support payments, especially those over 55 years on JobSeeker are at very high risk of homelessness due to the rapidly growing rental crisis. The largest cohort receiving JobSeeker are people over 55 years old<sup>4</sup>

## Not all older people are the same.

The main driver of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing. A lack of access to affordable housing impacts differently on different groups of people, and some groups of people have more systemic barriers than others.

### Older Women – "the hidden homeless"

Older women are the fastest growing group of people facing homelessness. We estimate there are 405,000 older women at risk of homelessness in Australia.<sup>5</sup>

Multiple structural and systemic issues, as well as changes to personal circumstances, can increase an older women's risk of homelessness. Rising housing costs, eviction, job loss, financial instability, domestic violence or elder abuse, the end of a relationship, sudden illness and disability or a combination of these factors can result in older women experiencing homelessness later in life. These challenges are exacerbated for older women who have been in the largely feminised and low paid care sector, taking time off work for care responsibilities and have limited superannuation.

Since the start of the pandemic, women have been found to be more likely to live in poverty than men and tend to stay in poverty for longer; additionally, rates of poverty for older women have risen.<sup>6</sup>

Many older women are "hidden" and do not present at homelessness services. They may be couch surfing, pet sitting, or travelling in vans, not recognizing that they are "homeless" or not knowing where to go for help. Many have managed their whole lives and have not needed services before, or think that there is someone worse off than them. Many are facing homelessness for the first time in older age.<sup>7</sup>

*"I've always been frugal, extremely careful with my choices. But I had a marriage breakdown, an abusive one, and then I had to go through a long time of being primary carer for my child. It takes its toll, it's a lot of pressure. I'm a strong person, so I coped. I coped with sickness, financial burden, as a single parent, but I got through."*

– Priscilla, 67, Melbourne<sup>8</sup>





HAAG members Phyll and Vicky calling for more public housing

## Older LGBTI<sup>9</sup> People

The public perception of LGBTI people is largely one of a young, affluent community. However, the reality is that within the LGBTI community a large share of LGBTI adults are older, have a low-socioeconomic status and are at risk of homelessness.<sup>10</sup>

There are significant research gaps in the experiences of older LGBTI Australians and housing. Throughout 2019-2020 HAAG surveyed and interviewed 228 older LGBTI people aged between 50 and 85 years of age about their housing. We found that more older LGBTI people have experienced homelessness than their non-LGBTI counterparts and are in circumstances that place them at risk of homelessness, including:

- Lower numbers own their own homes outright, and significant numbers are in private rental, even at retirement age.
- High numbers living in “informal” housing arrangements such as share housing, living with ex-partners or renting from friends.
- Significant numbers of older LGBTI people live with disabilities and are in caring roles.
- LGBTI elders are 7 times more likely to live alone than the general older population.
- Although older LGBTI people are at a greater risk of homelessness, they do not recognise that they are at risk and 60% of LGBTI older people do not know where to go for help and information about their housing options.<sup>11</sup>

*“I am terrified of becoming homeless in the future... I have no family or friends to ask for support”*

– John, 55, Gay, on the Disability Support Pension<sup>12</sup>

There are a lack of affordable housing options for older LGBTI people, a lack of LGBTI friendly homelessness services and a lack of appropriate community education about housing options to prevent older LGBTI people becoming homeless.

## Aboriginal Elders

As a consequence of colonialism, racism, the impact of stolen generations, dispossession from land, culture and traditional social structures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities experience disproportionately high levels of financial stress and homelessness.

*“When our elders are not housed or not housed properly, they are the hub of the family. All the family will congregate around the elders, they’ll support them, they’ll be there with them, they will see them daily, they will want to interact with them, that’s their teaching for the future, that’s the stability. So if the stability isn’t there for the elders, then it’s not there for the family.”*

– Teresa Jasper, Wamba Wamba woman<sup>13</sup>

Aboriginal people persistently report that they experience discrimination in the private rental market and this, combined with high rents, digital exclusion, and poor quality housing, means that Aboriginal people are “excluded from the start” from obtaining housing<sup>14</sup>.

## Older Culturally and Linguistically Diverse people

Migration history plays an important part in housing security and risk of homelessness. Post-war migrants who migrated as younger people may be home owners and own multiple homes, however they can be at increased risk of being exploited or even abused by adult family members upon whom they rely upon for navigating Australian services or translating documents.

*“Some people can be settled (in Australia) for a long time, they sign as a guarantor for their family, and lose their house when their children go broke.”*

– Serbian Reference Group<sup>15</sup>

People who migrated as older people, for example, on grandparent visas, may be living under “assurances of support”, limiting their housing options if things go wrong with family. Refugees and people on temporary protection visas may not be eligible for public and community housing. Many face racism in the private rental market. Language barriers and poverty make online service navigation difficult.<sup>16</sup>

*“A lot of parents are selling their property [overseas] so they can pay for a visa to come to Australia. Then when they come to Australia they are treated as a ‘free domestic worker’ or ‘free babysitter’ for their children... Because they are not eligible for social security for 10 years, even if they face the problem of homelessness, they aren’t eligible for support”*

– Chinese Reference Group<sup>17</sup>

## Climate change and housing

Climate change has disproportionate impacts on the most vulnerable communities. For example, older people, especially women are overrepresented in heatwave related mortality statistics<sup>18</sup>.

There are no minimum standards for rental properties that may mitigate the effect of extreme weather. Older renters can't cool down their hot, poorly insulated homes, as the cost of electricity rises. A recent study by ACOSS showed that 90% of Centrelink recipients were getting sick from not being able to cool their homes.<sup>19</sup> Heatwaves are not considered an "emergency" therefore do not receive a coordinated emergency response, like bushfires and floods, with local governments often taking the lead on providing support to residents. However, these supports often rely on having money (e.g. going to airconditioned shopping centers) or transport (going to the pool), which older renters may not have.

## Solutions

Housing affordability and homelessness is a political choice. We need more investment in well-designed and well-located public housing, stronger rental laws to protect renters and a building code that enforces minimum standards for energy efficiency and accessibility. Older

people need a range of housing options – rental villages, housing co-operatives, public and community housing, and even private rental can work for older people if they are underpinned with the minimum requirements for a healthy life, that is, affordability, accessibility, comfort and security of tenure.

## Conclusion

Many older people are activists, volunteers, community workers – as younger people, they may have travelled around, squatted, lived in big share houses, dumpster dived, and survived on low incomes. But this becomes harder and harder as you get older. The reality is if you are a single person aged over 55 and living in private rental, you may be at risk of homelessness. We need to address the systemic issues impacting on housing inequality and fight for housing justice as part of our response to environment and climate issues.

*For more information, see: HAAG - [www.oldertenants.org.au](http://www.oldertenants.org.au); Everybody's Home Campaign - <https://everybodyshome.com.au/>; Building Better Homes Campaign - <https://www.buildingbetterhomes.org.au/>*

***Fiona York** is the Executive Officer of Housing for the Aged Action Group and a long-time volunteer for Friends of the Earth affiliate Goongerab Environment Centre (GECO).*

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Residents of Murundaka  
Cohousing community  
enjoying a community dinner.  
Credit: Chris Grose

# Rental Housing Coops: An empowering alternative to the rental crisis

Sanne de Swart

If it wasn't for our rental housing coop, I would still be living in share houses, with kids having to crawl through live wires and cat vomit, or in a two bedroom apartment in whoop-whoop.

Instead I am lucky to live in a leafy suburb in inner Melbourne with a garden where I can grow my veggies and kids can jump on a trampoline. I have the security of being able to stay here for as long as my family wants on below-market-rate rent and the flexibility of our rent decreasing if our household income goes down.

All thanks to a group of single mums in the inner suburbs in the 1980's that were advocating for more affordable housing. This coincided with the unlikely ally of a liberal government wanting to privatise public housing and some great individuals at the then department of housing helping to create the rental housing cooperatives.

Our coop gives low income families the chance to have long term housing security and stability while being tenant-owners. This means, running the coop, having a say over what happens to our properties and how coop money gets to benefit families. Members are required or strongly encouraged to be involved on the board or one of the subcommittees. The model relieves households of housing stress and enables members to study, or focus on whatever developments they need to create a stable income, so they can contribute more to the coop to secure its sustainability.

Rental Housing Cooperatives sit under an umbrella of various collaborative housing models. This description sums it up:

"Collaborative housing covers a very broad spectrum of housing arrangements, in a variety of sizes, for a range of ages and demographic groups, and with options for both owners and

renters. There is a sometimes bewildering array of overlapping terms for collaborative housing projects: cohousing, co-living, cooperatives, intentional communities and ecovillages, to list a few."<sup>1</sup>

There are quite a few housing coops in Australia, some specifically for elderly residents or women only. Some are co-housing communities, like the environment-focused Murundaka, which originated when two families on 2 generous blocks with suburban houses decided to make way for 18 smaller apartments with a big common area/kitchen and amazing common garden. They started their own coop and are housing up to 40 people in a place where formerly 2-10 people lived.

Co-housing is "a sustainable and affordable approach to living in community. Cohousing communities are intentional communities, with people seeking out a community feel to their home lives. They are created and run by their residents cooperating to create better lives. Each household has a self-contained, private home as well as shared community space. Residents come together to manage their community, share activities, and regularly eat together."<sup>2</sup>

It is not all gold here. Being part of a housing coop can mean dealing with challenging group dynamics and conflict. Also, if not enough people actively participate, the onus falls on the shoulders of a small group of people who are likely to burn out. And sometimes it can be challenging to find new members that truly understand what it means, or have the mental space, to be an active coop member.

Nevertheless, we need more models like my rental housing coop to radically transform the renter landscape and put the power back in the hands of the renters. I recommend finding out if there are any housing coops or collaborative housing initiatives near you and see how you can get involved. Or start your own.

*For more information and examples of housing cooperatives, cohousing and other alternatives, see:*

*Cohousing Australia Website:* [transitionaustralia.net/site/cohousing-australia](https://transitionaustralia.net/site/cohousing-australia)

*CHIA Victoria website:* [chiavic.com.au](https://chiavic.com.au)

*Common Equity Housing Website:* [cehl.com.au](https://cehl.com.au)

*Murundaka Cohousing Community:* [murundakacohousing.org.au](https://murundakacohousing.org.au)

*Sanne de Swart works with the Nuclear Free Collective at Friends of the Earth Melbourne and has the amazing privilege to live in a housing coop.*

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# Movable Units

Freya Leonard

It is often said it takes a village to raise a child. This is just as true for anyone who needs a community of support around them, including older folks or people with a disability. Sadly villages are in short supply, replaced by the isolation of nuclear cities and individual properties. Nowadays the villages we see in our suburbs and larger towns are mostly retirement villages. This is a marketing term of course, that trades on the truth that people were made for village life.

This is why, when I was in the increasingly fortunate position to start very slowly buying a house, we made the decision to have myself, my sons and my father all live together on our outer suburban block. We'd be our own little village.

My dad is mostly independent but isolation suits nobody and studies show that older people living with family and a diversity of age groups around them have longer, healthier lives with greater joy.

However it quickly became apparent that all living under one roof was a recipe for relationship destruction. Dad was fond of playing the radio very loudly, and my sons were starting to enter adolescence. The clash of noise and need for separate social spaces in the home were creating friction that threatened to undermine the best intentions of family harmony.

For years I had heard rumour of a program where

“the government” would install a self-contained unit for a dependent or older family member at no charge. Amazing! Which level of government, I wondered? The rumours had suggested it was available through Councils. So began a literally years long journey of investigation into this Shangri La of shared housing.

I have worked for a state Member of Parliament. A big part of my job was helping constituents access state government services and I felt I knew my way around the various agencies and services on offer. However, calls to my Council met with confusion. Repeated calls to various state divisions of aged care services kept hitting brick walls. And all the time relationships in our home became increasingly strained. We now had six people living in a four bedroom house and it took effort on all of our parts to not descend into turmoil.

On something like my 20<sup>th</sup> call to the Victorian Department of Aged Care in 2011 I found someone who knew what I was looking for. “Call the Housing Department”, she said “and ask for the Movable Units section. Make sure you use the words ‘Movable Units’”, she said almost scandalously, as if divulging a state secret.

I dialled the number. The phone rang out. I tried again, and just as I was about to hang up someone answered. “Yes?” they said in a voice that cracked from disuse, steeped with suspicion.



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"Is this the Movable Units section?"

"Yes" they admitted reluctantly. Wow. After two and a half years I'd found them. I explained our situation. Asked if we might be eligible. The person on the other end of the line explained what we would need to do and what they could provide, all couched in terms of barriers and obstacles. You need to be a landowner. Must be able to guarantee a flat site the size of the unit plus a 1m easement around the unit. The site must be no more than 10m from the existing dwelling and utilities. There must be a path of clear access from the street sufficient to allow the sections of the kit unit in. We might have to wait up to six months before a unit was available. The unit would only be available to a family member over the age of 55 or someone on a disability payment. We were able to satisfy all of these requirements. I filled in the forms, entering into a tenancy agreement with the Office of Housing and my dad in turn filled in a tenancy agreement with the Housing Department to rent at either \$114/week or a quarter of his regular income, whichever was lowest.

Less than a week later we were told a unit was available and would be ready to be installed in four weeks.

I might have exaggerated when I had said we already had a flat site. We had a site that could be made flat, but it was going to take a lot of digging.

Fortunately my oldest son was by now really hitting his stride with wildly energetic adolescent fury. So anytime he had pent up frustration we would put a shovel in his hand and send him into the backyard. Through driving rain, into the dark of night, from first thing in the morning we all dug and dug. We developed muscles on our muscles. "Where will we put all this dirt?" my partner wondered as we furiously terraformed the backyard. "We're going to bury it!" I announced.

We huffed and we puffed and we drew the house in, just on deadline. Within a week the shell of



Dad's new home sat on site. Another four weeks later and it was connected to water, electricity and (ugh!) gas. Dad, who had earlier reservations about 'being kicked into the backyard' was delighted with the result and has been happy there ever since.

Fewer and fewer people can own a home and fewer still live on a block large enough to accommodate a movable unit. For Victorians who are able to take advantage of this fantastic initiative, **a movable unit costs the landowner nothing and is an affordable way to keep families in community with each other** and out of the deprivations and isolation of aged care living.

And if you live outside of Victoria why not write to the housing minister in your state or territory and ask them if they can offer something similar? It saves the government money on aged care, support and health services and makes for a happier, more civil society.

SO DON'T TELL ANYONE that you can find out more about the Movable Units Public Housing scheme at [www.housing.vic.gov.au/public-housing-movable-units](http://www.housing.vic.gov.au/public-housing-movable-units) or by calling 1300 475 170.

**Freja Leonard** is the No More Gas campaign coordinator at Friends of the Earth. Get involved: [freja.leonard@foe.org.au](mailto:freja.leonard@foe.org.au).

# Fuel Switching for Rentals

Freja Leonard

Sensible energy management is an issue touching on energy, housing, health, economic and planning policy with critical urgency. But for renters your options for improving your household carbon footprint and energy bills are woefully limited.

If you rent, and there's a roughly 30% chance that you do, you probably rent a house where it takes the landowner forever to fix things that go wrong. You probably don't take action to compel the landowner to fulfil their legal obligations to you as a tenant because of fear of rent increases and blacklisting. You probably also live in a home with a terrible energy rating, and old poorly maintained appliances that use disproportionate amounts of energy to heat and cool compared to the average home.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly likely for any houses built or renovated in the past ten years, when energy ratings have been at least five stars.<sup>2</sup>

If you're reading this you're almost certainly aware of escalating climate change and the health impacts associated with gas in the home. You're almost certainly concerned by climbing energy bills. So you probably look at the offered rebates for solar and more efficient appliances with wistful detachment or muted fury at having just about no hope of your landowner agreeing to make the most of these opportunities to help the planet, your health or economic benefit. Why would they? What's in it for them?

Leaving aside for a very brief moment the fact that a safe, liveable home is a basic human right, if we are to meet our emissions reduction targets we have to do everything in our power to reduce energy demand. One of the easy ways to do this quickly is to tighten up the thermal efficiency of every home, starting with the oldest least efficient houses: those most likely to be rentals. This is particularly critical where a house uses gas – around a third of human induced climate change is caused by methane, the gas we use in our homes. Compared to the 300-1000 year lifespan of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, methane dissipates within 12 years. It's more than 80 times more warming to the climate in the near term than carbon dioxide.

So we need some powerful incentives to compel rapid rental property upgrades. And, these incentives need to be designed so renters don't have to face rent increases. If done properly, these measures would result in tenants enjoying reduced energy costs.

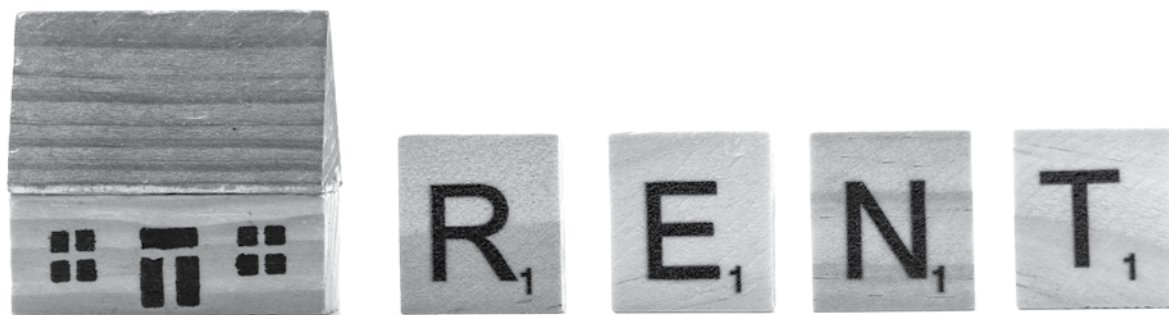
Some steps are being taken in an encouraging direction. In the ACT all rentals will be required to upgrade the thermal insulation from a minimum of R2 to R5 by November 2026, and public housing will be updated with efficient appliances.<sup>3</sup> In Victoria ambitions are lower. Since 2021 homes are only required to have 2 star or above energy ratings, are not required to offer air conditioning, and there are no current minimum standards for thermal efficiency.<sup>4</sup>

So I asked our No More Gas intern, Antonia Raabe-Scott, to investigate levers to incentivise landowners to upgrade the houses they lease to six or more stars – which would meet the current building efficiency standard mandated under the National Construction Code.<sup>5</sup> In her report "Getting off gas in the rental sector" she proposes a series of recommendations that act as carrot and stick approaches to driving fuel switching and better thermal efficiency in rentals.<sup>6</sup> These include:

- energy efficiency star ratings be mandatorily disclosed to prospective renters,
- properties below a 7 star rating not be permitted to be available to the rental market after a certain date, allowing all properties the necessary time to upgrade,
- Government incentives be made available to rental properties to encourage property owners to upgrade the efficiency of those properties,
- the efficiency values and associated appliances be specifically added to the rental inspection checklist,
- the cost of upgrades of rental homes be tackled by Government on a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood basis,
- where gas is still connected to the home, service charges be allocated to the landowner rather than the renter, leaving the renter to simply pay for the gas itself in a scheme similar to that currently in force for water bills.

*if we are to meet our emissions reduction targets we have to do everything in our power to reduce energy demand*





To this I would also add government subsidies to landowners for improved efficiency, and solar and appliance upgrades be means tested against the income of the resident, not the landowner. This would create an incentive for rental providers to offer leases to lower income renters at prices they can afford in order to attract the highest government subsidies. Any shortfall between the cost of installation and the offered subsidies must be covered by the landowner with restrictions on rent increases within the twelve-month period in which the upgrades are undertaken.

Managing energy demand in rentals and ensuring that rental standards will deliver safe, comfortable, and affordable homes for all has been relegated to the too-hard basket for so long that the problems with rentals are reaching

crisis point. We need a multi-agency approach harmonised across federal, state and territory governments to prioritise the growing rental sector nationally. State and territory governments could show they know what leadership looks like, and take a leaf out of the ACT Government's book, ensuring all current and new public housing sets standards that private rentals will be required by legislation or regulation to follow.

Doing so ensures that millions of tenants across the country will have better energy security, health outcomes and financial wellbeing – which benefits renters, reduces demand on government services and benefits local economies.

**Freja Leonard** is the No More Gas campaign coordinator at Friends of the Earth. Get involved: [freja.leonard@foe.org.au](mailto:freja.leonard@foe.org.au).

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# It's Time for a Housing Disruption



Credit: Erwin, Pixabay

Karl Fitzgerald

*After decades of relying on property developers to deliver the affordable housing needed, a new group – Grounded Community Land Trust Advocacy – has come together to lobby for more community led housing under a for-purpose model.*

We can't sit by and allow profit seeking developers to determine the essence of our lives. Crummy homes suffering from poor design are a by-product of rampant land prices curtailing architectural dreams. Community Land Trusts (CLTs) have been discussed in the Australian context for close to twenty years. However, we still don't have one in operation.

This led to the formation of Grounded Community Land Trust Advocacy. As a small NGO, we are driven to make for-purpose housing a force to be reckoned with. Alternative housing models must become a core component of a progressive society.

CLTs remove land from the speculative market by placing a legal covenant on the land and housing's resale value. A CLT may limit the resale value of a home to 60% of the median price in the suburb. Or it may use a formula where it limits housing costs to 30% of the median income for the bottom 40% of income earners in that region. This is known as the 3040 rule.

Long term affordability is the central aim of the Trust, with both legal and economic protections put in place. The land is managed by an independent board that is composed of 1/3 residents, 1/3 neighbours and 1/3 civic minded individuals. The board holds the land in trust to

ensure it is perpetually affordable for residents and maintained as an important community resource. Residents sign a contract accepting this arrangement, in effect agreeing that the trust will give them access to this land in acceptance that little financial return will occur for this ownership.

Deposits required to get into a CLT home can be up to 70% lower. This can help renters find security of tenure up to a decade earlier than on the open market. By ensuring an affordability lock is placed on the land and housing, this grounds pricing growth to the reality of our wages. In doing this, we place a shield over housing, recognising it as a place of shelter - as a human (rather than speculative) right.

Grounded is advocating to improve the right for community led housing. There must be an alternative to market-led cookie cutter homes. We have no statutory definition of CLTs anywhere in the country. This means government hasn't provided a legislative definition of the concept. Banks are therefore less likely to lend to a housing model more popular in permaculture circles than on the pages of the AFR.

Building confidence in the banking sector is a major objective. With Bank Australia joining the Global Alliance for Banking on Values,<sup>1</sup> the move towards ethical banking is growing. They have lent to the ACT's Land Rent Scheme - a public land trust, so a precedent exists. At the Federal level, a number of tax incentives have been established to support Environmental Land Trusts. We need similar reforms in place for community owned trusts in either the residential or affordable farmland sectors too.<sup>2</sup>



## CLTs – History and Why They're Important

The history of Community Land Trusts is compelling. They have been in operation since the early 1970's in the US, with examples going back to the early 1900s under land rent colonies.<sup>3</sup>

In 1973, landless African American farmers understood that the battle against segregation in the deep south meant little if one couldn't afford a roof over their head or land upon which to stand. This led to the world's first CLT - New Communities, Inc Farm, established by Slater King, Charles Sherrod and Dr Bob Swann.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, their tenure was challenged with racist impediments relentlessly thrown at these pioneers. From building delays to watered down fertiliser, they fought a valiant battle that was finally recognised in a multi-million dollar payout decades later.<sup>5</sup>

Now with over 50 years of CLT history, the data is revealing. Community-led housing leads to better outcomes - just like it does in health, education and many other core components of life. Many CLTs incorporate financial planning into their community ethos, helping residents plan for unexpected events. During the GFC, US foreclosure rates were 82% lower in CLTs than in the mainstream market.<sup>6</sup>

Over in the UK, the health, well being and income distribution positives are such that for every \$1 invested in CLTs, there is a \$3.1 return over 30 years.<sup>7</sup> This is virtually unheard of in housing. Policies such as the Albanese government's Help to Buy policy and the wretched Regional First Home Buyers grant both act to inflate land values.<sup>8</sup>

With less spent on land by a CLT resident, the homeowner can afford to invest more in resilient buildings. UK CLTs have been estimated to reduce CO2 emissions by 15-50%.<sup>9</sup> US CLTs in places like Florida are being built to be hurricane resistant, and in Alameda, a bushfire retardant bunker is incorporated into the design.<sup>10</sup>



We look forward to a future where we can incorporate permaculture design into housing developments so that our entire living envelope can be more resilient to the climate shift we are witnessing. Underpinning this is a need to recycle the ever increasing value of location, location, so that it helps to make our communities stronger - rather than falling prey as a gentrification target.

Without stable and secure housing, there is no freedom, no matter who we vote for. We need more than democracy, we need an economic democracy where we all share from the rising value of living in effective communities.

*Find out more: [www.grounded.org.au](http://www.grounded.org.au)*

**Karl Fitzgerald** is the Managing Director of Grounded CLT Advocacy. He ran the *Renegade Economists* podcast on 3CR for 13 years, whilst working at Prosper Australia as Research Director. It was there that he developed tools to reveal the hidden housing supply property speculators and land bankers use to manipulate supply so it never trickled down.

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# Better Together

Nicola Beatrix, edited by Dan Prochazka

The idea for Open Field Co-Living was conceived in a small, dark living room in a sharehouse in inner city Melbourne. The living room's only light came from a tiny, frosted south facing window and the damp cold wind was constantly being sucked through the house via the broken kitchen window. But we were too scared to ask the landlord to repair it, lest they arbitrarily end the lease. It was the 7th time I had moved house in 5 years. Almost every time, the 12 month lease had ended and each house had been sold to a developer. To anyone who has rented in Australia, this story probably sounds sadly familiar, right?

As we sat there listening to our housemates coughing through the paper thin, uninsulated walls, we thought: *there has got to be a better way to do housing.*

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Almost a year later, with a baby on the way, the craving to have a permanent, stable home was strong. We had both lived in shared houses or various communities for all of our adult lives, and knew really clearly that we wanted to continue to share a home with others. We knew building the house from scratch would likely take a year or two longer than buying one outright, though with Dan's experience as a home energy assessor and eco-building designer, creating our own was an opportunity too good to be missed. We could create a very low energy home and, rarest of all, could create a design that would actually suit the needs of co-living!

We didn't just want to make a home for ourselves, we wanted to do something really different, something radical. Something others might not be brave or stupid enough to do. We had read Peter Mares' book 'No Place Like Home'; analysing the systemic causes of the housing crisis, and the shortcomings of action from governments, councils and businesses attempting to create stable housing. We wanted to demonstrate another model of what sustainable, socially connected and secure housing could look like.

The challenge that we set ourselves was to create a home that:

1. Allows multiple families and individuals to live together, with a balance of communal facilities and private space,
2. Integrates seamlessly with the homestead and permaculture systems of the property, with easy access to the gardens, orchards, and water systems,
3. Supports a net zero transition: uses almost no energy to heat and cool, and avoiding high embodied energy materials such as concrete and polystyrene,
4. Is resilient to the effects of climate change: heatwaves, droughts, floods, and resource scarcity,
5. Creates a calm and healthy sanctuary for its occupants, with rich natural, recycled and local materials that are breathable and chemical-free,
6. Provides universal accessibility, making the house safer and easier for people with disabilities or injuries, older people, and families with young children,
7. Is viable within current laws, building standards, council regulations, zoning and financial systems.

The result was a simple, rectangular hempcrete home with a big passive-solar roof and capacity to house 10-15 residents. The numerous north-facing windows will fill the house with natural light, maximising energy efficiency, and connecting it visually to the gardens and bush beyond. The simple design will make it as cost effective to build as possible, allowing more money to be spent on the builder's craftsmanship, and high quality recycled or natural materials. All of the highly sound-insulated bedrooms and the resident's main bathroom will be situated along a single hallway on the west side of the house, which creates a private, quiet, 'west wing' for residents to retreat to. On the other hand, the large kitchen, pantry, living areas, study, guest room and accessible bathroom will form the public communal space in the east wing. Having all of the bedrooms along the same hallway and just one kitchen were very intentional decisions. We've observed from other communities that having a physical design that encourages incidental social interaction is really important for a sense of continued connection with each other.

With the land on 10 acres in a 'rural living' zone, it is well placed to support a climate-resilient homesteading lifestyle. Water and human waste systems will be managed off-grid through composting and rainwater collection. Electricity will be primarily self-sufficient through solar and batteries, and will be connected back into the grid to make green energy available to the community, contributing to the broader 'Net Zero' transition. Orchards, animals, market gardens, and aquaculture in the large dam will be cultivated in concert with soil regeneration and biodiversity.

To get this project off the ground, we pursued a basic joint tenancy model presenting as a typical hetero-family. The biggest advantage of this type of ownership is that it is simple and fast. It's the most common and



well-known ownership structure used by most couples or families in Australia, and the one that real estate agents, councils and lenders know and like. We aim to transition to a more flexible ownership structure in future, such as a Unit Trust,<sup>2</sup> once a group of core long-term residents has been established. Because we're just building one big 'family home', our building plans were approved really quickly, and the only thing that held us up with our building permit was our choice to use hempcrete. A co-living project where residents all live under one roof really is the simplest and quickest way of creating an intentional community.

In contrast, we have heard of other co-buying groups taking several years or even decades and a mountain of administrative headaches to find a lender agreeable to financing their eco-village or co-housing project where this also required gaining council approval for several separate dwellings on one lot. If a key part of our dream was for our daughter to grow up surrounded by other children and families, then having a home that would only be ready by the time she's old enough to move out would make the whole thing kind of pointless!

During some of our initial research, we were surprised to read that of the 10% of communities that actually get off the ground, almost all were founded and funded by just one or two people with a strong vision, who found others who shared that vision to join at later stages.<sup>3</sup> It's not only simple in terms of legalities and financing, but it avoids the risks of stagnancy and conflict caused by endless hours arguing as a group over mundane details such as which colour to paint the living room wall!

One of the biggest disadvantages of our current ownership model is the potential for hierarchy to develop within the community between owner-residents and non-owner residents given their differences in rights and responsibilities. As a way of managing this, we are planning on using a model similar to the 'Radish' co-living project in the US. At Radish,<sup>4</sup> the property is owned by a group of co-owners, but the community is managed and run by a group of community members who are renting the property under a long-term lease from the co-ownership group. Some people are members of both the co-ownership and resident group, while others might be members of just one group, depending on their

desire for flexibility, stability or investment. Just as in the Radish model, we aim to shift as much power as possible to the resident community members in terms of managing the household and property, leaving the ownership group with basic responsibilities such as paying the mortgage and making repairs.

Of course, we know that living together in one big house is going to involve a fair amount of compromise, collaboration, and yes, even conflict. But the way we see it, single family and solo living also have their own challenges. As Ecovillages Australia suggest, either way, you "choose your challenge".<sup>5</sup> We're not afraid of conflict; differences of opinion are an inevitable part of all relationships. If we have the willingness to put in the time and energy to learn tools and strategies to navigate it together, conflict can become an opportunity for strengthening connection and understanding. Or, a signal to change something or find other ways to meet our needs. We have found 'Compassionate Communication' (also known as 'Non-violent Communication')<sup>6</sup> and 'Possibility Management' to be helpful tools for navigating tense moments, but we are in no ways experts, and are totally learning as we go. We know that we are going to mess it up time and time again, but are courageous enough to keep trying.

For us, it's totally worth it, because the benefits of living closely with others far outweigh the challenges. Having lived communally most of our lives, we have found this way of living to primarily be rich with a sense of community, support, connection, fun and laughter. Saving money through sharing resources also enables us to more effectively put our values around anti-consumerism and climate resilience into practice. It also involves way less housework! (I didn't ever do the dishes last year. Like, never! It was someone else's chore that they chose to do and loved doing. I did other chores that I loved doing. Can you imagine that?). As new parents, having friends close to us for mutual support and company on the parenting journey and other children for our child to grow up with is worth more than anything. And coming home to hugs from friends and deep chats over a home-grown meal is just the richest way to live.

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**Nicola** is a children's therapist, passionate environmentalist, and co-creator of 'Open Field Co-Living' near Castlemaine on Djaara country.



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# Racism & The Housing Crisis of the Central Deserts and Northern Territory

Aia Newport

According to the 2016 census, the Northern Territory has by far the highest rate of homelessness on this continent, with an average of 600 homeless people per 10,000 population.<sup>1</sup> This is compared to an average of 42 in Victoria.<sup>2</sup> With the NT having the highest proportion of Indigenous populations of each state and Territory, this can be seen as a failing of the Australian government to provide adequate housing to Aboriginal people. Let's take a closer look at the history and current reality of the housing crisis in the NT.

Indigenous peoples of the desert had various uses for shelter prior to colonisation. In the Central Desert the Warlpiri people made dry-stone hides for hunting wallabies and kangaroos near waterholes, and Arrernte people protected sacred objects with stone walls.<sup>3</sup> In the Simpson desert, mia mias (humpies) were made from wood by the Wangkangurru people as houses.<sup>4</sup> People of the Western desert also built villages of domed huts, called wiltjas, from timber and spinifex cladding.<sup>5</sup>

The current housing situation in Mparntwe has been shaped by its colonial history, and resistance by Aboriginal peoples. On Arrernte lands, dispossession began in 1870 with the building of the telegraph station. In surrounding areas, pastoralists claimed land with permanent water sources, denying sovereign peoples their access to water. The town of Mparntwe was made a prohibited zone for Indigenous people for over 30 years, from 1929 to 1960, and Aboriginal people formed camps on the outskirts of town among their family groups. In the 1960s, town campers formed a collective now known as Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation to gain access to land, shelter, services, transport, firewood and garbage collection. To my knowledge there are now 20 official town camps in Mparntwe.

We need to celebrate these town camps for their organisation and capacity to house and shelter hundreds of Indigenous families. Overall however, they cannot provide sufficient housing that meets the needs of broader Indigenous communities. The separation of town camps from more wealthy non-indigenous suburbs forms an apartheid-like

segregation that fuels division and discrimination in town. Houses built in town camps mimic those of western suburbia and are designed to accommodate nuclear families rather than extended Indigenous family networks, disrupting Aboriginal kinship relations. Moreover, houses in the NT are often crowded with up to 25 residents in a 3 bedroom house.<sup>6</sup>

This overcrowding, caused by limited housing stock and lack of government funding, causes a great number of issues for local mob. During the outbreak of COVID-19 in the area, town campers and people living in remote communities were unable to isolate and so the virus spread quickly among community members. Domestic violence is also heightened by over-crowding where family members are unable to take space from each other, or easily find alternative housing to escape when required. Young people living with relatives with alcohol addictions can also be drawn out into the streets and may opt for sleeping rough to avoid tensions and drunkenness at home. In the NT, a third of homeless people are under the age of 18.<sup>7</sup>

Another issue with government-funded housing throughout the NT is the poor quality and lack of maintenance of the houses. Much of the housing is more than 40 years old and, having been built to fit within tight budgets, have not stood the test of harsh weather well. Housing for Health, an organisation aiming to improve housing for Indigenous peoples through the NT, have found that 70% of the repairs they do are due to a lack of regular maintenance on houses by state and local government.<sup>8</sup> With repairs being neglected for long periods of time, people are often forced to live without working hot water systems, showers, toilets and doors, making the houses all but uninhabitable. Poor-quality housing is a significant driving force of death and disease in remote communities of the Northern Territory where there are high rates of "devastating and preventable diseases" including acute rheumatic fever (ARF), rheumatic heart disease (RHD), acute post streptococcal glomerulonephritis, chronic suppurative lung disease and skin infections that can affect a person's health for life.<sup>9</sup>





Indigenous people are worried about the effects and are demanding immediate improvements. A class action was filed against the Northern Territory public housing body in December 2022 by remote community residents who state that the government has failed to maintain public housing in remote Aboriginal communities. It claims houses are “not safe, habitable, or secure, with tenants paying excessive rent for housing that does not meet basic minimum standards”.<sup>10</sup> Ron Mangiru, a community leader living in Gunbalanya who cares for his unwell brother, has asked his landlord to address the lack of air conditioning in his home. “It’s really not good enough and is very complicated for us Aboriginal people living in remote communities,” he said. “White people are given houses with air con or people come and fix the air con. But we live in a hot area and have no air conditioning. I am scared about the health impacts the heat has on my brother”.<sup>11</sup>

The Central Land Council (CLC) also demands solutions for housing in the NT. The CLC is

“a council of 90 Aboriginal women and men elected by our communities in Central Australia to represent them, fight for their rights, help them reclaim and manage their land and realise the opportunities that come with the recognition of property rights”.<sup>12</sup> CLC chief executive Les Turner says, “To save lives and improve the life chances of our people, we need the federal and NT governments between them to spend at least two billion over the next five years. This will build 2,000 new houses and make another 4,000 houses more liveable in communities and homelands across the CLC region.”<sup>13</sup>

Housing isn’t rocket science. There needs to be more funding for housing in the NT that meets the specific needs of Indigenous ways of being. We can make this happen now.

**Aia** (they/them) was born on Wurrundjeri country and is of Scottish, Welsh, and English descent. They live on stolen Arrernte Country. Get in contact at [sunshine.punch@protonmail.com](mailto:sunshine.punch@protonmail.com).

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# The future that has not been delivered...

Elyse Cunningham

Driving into Mount Atkinson feels like you are entering an entirely new world. On arrival you're greeted by a big sign for the developers who have been selling plots of this unceded land, along with promises of a flourishing community in the future. They say that 'One day there will be a Westfield!', and 'A train station is on the way!' However, as it stands now, there is not even a pharmacy or supermarket.

I spoke to Randeep, a young woman who migrated to Australia from India and has lived in Mt. Atkinson for 2 years. The following interview will hopefully provide some insight into what everyday life is like for her.

**Elyse:** What were your initial feelings when you moved to Mt. Atkinson?

**Randeep:** When we bought land in Mt. Atkinson, we were so excited... I can't even put it into words how excited I was... "We're gonna have our own space, I'm gonna go exploring!".. But then the reality hit... The first problem, the main problem, was public transport. I had to take Uber to get to my job, I wasn't earning as much as I was spending on Uber, so I had to quit.

Mt. Atkinson has no train station, no trams, and no buses. There is one courtesy bus (more a van than a bus - provided by the developers) that runs at 6am, and 7pm every day to take people to Rockbank train station. The bus runs one way only, to the train station in the morning, and back to the estate in the evening. You can't go the other way.

**Randeep:** At first it was fine... But it became worse because I am stuck at home. I can't go anywhere. I'm new here in this country. I want to explore this country, and for that, I need my husband to take me, which is not always possible. He only gets two days off, sometimes only one. Because we are immigrants and we need to work hard.

Basically, we just feel completely isolated. We don't have access to basic amenities. We're not asking for something extra, like the shopping centres or anything, but the basic amenities. For that we need to go to another estate, which again, is not possible because of the transportation. So it's hard in that way.

Randeep has a phobia of driving, so is unable to get around the city without public transport or someone driving her. This is not an uncommon situation. For folks who don't drive, and who live in areas where there is little or no public transport, it has a profound impact on their mental and physical wellbeing.

The question is, who is responsible for the impact that this has on people's lives?

**Elyse:** What was the process of purchasing your place? Did you buy it directly through the developers? How was it packaged for you?

**Randeep:** It wasn't the first place that we wanted to buy. It could have been anywhere, we just wanted a house. My husband came to Mt. Atkinson, to the office, and they told him which slots were available and that there's





gonna be a Westfield in the future, which made us like 'oh wow'.. They just sort of made it look like it's gonna be good value for money, you know, in future.

They said there's a kindergarten, two preschools as well, so we thought it was a good deal. It was more expensive than ones in other estates, but in the future we're getting these good things around us, so maybe we can invest.

**Elyse:** Did they say anything about transport in the future?

**Randeep:** They just keep saying near future, but what's that supposed to mean?

Future could be 50 years, 10 years, 20 years, 30 years. I think that's the strategy. They just say 'future' so that we cannot blame them for something. So that's how we got trapped.

There is a serious need for the Victorian government to address how planning is done in our state. Every person in our community deserves access to public transport, and to basic services like healthcare, shops, and education. These things should never be an afterthought when new developments are built. Many families commit to buying in these places without any idea of how isolating it is going to be. For Randeep, life is very different to what she envisioned moving out here.

**Randeep:** I love to do activities. I'm a very creative person with a strong imagination. I thought 'I'm gonna land in Australia and do karate classes, swimming classes, workshops cause I like to create, paint and everything'. I thought that would be accessible to me. I thought that wouldn't be a big deal because it's Australia.

We don't have a gym. Even in my village (in rural India) we have a gym 10 minutes away. So that's very infuriating. It's taking a mental toll on me. Eventually I just bought few canvases, painting colours, so I just paint at home. What else to do?

Even my husband had his second thoughts "Should we just go back to our country?" Because we're just going to our jobs, coming back, eating food and sleeping.

We had a better life in our country, at least we had some friends nearby and we just go to a restaurant nearby just five minutes away. But then you know, it's not that easy to just leave. So you're just kind of stuck. That's the word. You feel stuck. You can't even go back because when you came you thought "I'm just leaving everything, I'm starting a new life".

So it's really hard that way. We've been sold this place with the idea that it's an investment in the future and all these things are coming, but at the moment, and for who knows how long, they're not giving any answers.



Having adequate access to public transport that is well serviced is something that everybody deserves, no matter what part of a city they live in. For people who don't drive, something as simple as having a bus available can change their life dramatically.

Mt. Atkinson Estate.  
Credit: Randeep

**Elyse:** So we spoke about what you envisioned for your life before you moved here, so now I want to talk about the future. How would your life change if you did have better buses and adequate public transport in your area?

**Randeep:** Life would be different. Definitely. I wouldn't be at home most of the time. I want to be able to explore this country. It's so beautiful.

The other day I wanted to go to the museum and there was an exhibition, I would've went there, I would've explored new things. I like art.

I could make some friends. Right now there's no one I can connect to because, if I go for a walk, there's no common area or something like that. I mean, there's a cafe but then you need some company.

If there's a bus service, I think half of the problems would be solved. Because at least there will be mobility. I could get to other stations and then from there I could get somewhere.

*FoEM's Sustainable Cities collective is currently working on the Better Buses campaign to improve public transport options for communities in Melbourne's Western suburbs. Get involved: [melbournefoe.org.au/transport](http://melbournefoe.org.au/transport)*

*To see a detailed model of what Better Buses could do for the West, read: "Better Buses for Melbourne's West" by Iain Lawrie and John Stone, University of Melbourne, 2022. doi.org/10.26188/20253090.v2.*

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# HUSK Zine: "Here Lies Public Housing"

HUSK

*This article is reprinted with permission, originally a zine made by HUSK, a grassroots housing collective organised for and by people oppressed by patriarchy because of their gender; particularly those facing homelessness, domestic violence or violence from the state. We work hard to be a supportive place for refugees / asylum seekers, first nations people, those living with mental illness and/or disability, and the LGBTQ+ community.*

There are currently 82,000 empty properties in greater Melbourne alone and approximately 82,000 Victorians on the public housing waiting list. That's 1 entire house per person seeking housing. Of those 82,000 people, 24,000 are children.

Several thousand empty public properties are sitting idle in Melbourne alone, that's not including the thousands more empty properties owned by the government that haven't been specifically designated for public housing.

In 2016, leaked documents showed there were 800 empty government owned properties sitting idle for 3 years that had been acquired for the East West link project alone.

What's worse is there are also hundreds, if not thousands, of empty PUBLIC HOUSING properties in Victoria, including entire vacant estates (such as the North Melbourne Walk-Ups), that have been unused for more than four YEARS. Some of these properties are empty because the state has decided to quietly sell them off to private buyers, others simply because of mismanagement.

It's bad enough that any state-owned properties are being left vacant for years in the middle of a housing crisis, let alone properties bought and paid for by the government for the sole purpose of housing people.

We stayed in one of these vacant public housing properties for over 9 months before anyone even noticed. The house had been empty for years, it wasn't damaged, run down or dangerous in any way, just badly managed.

After being hassled by cops and agents of the state for weeks and resisting several eviction attempts, we were eventually forced out by the Department of Housing. That one property housed over 10 women and nonbinary queer folk over the 9 months we were occupying it. And also doubled as a social space. Imagine if all the empty properties owned by the government could be used to their full potential instead of sitting vacant.



Why is public housing important?  
And how is it different to social/  
community housing?

Community housing is a private form of housing for tenants on a low income. It has been growing quickly from the start of the 2000s, with the aid and encouragement of the Victorian state government. From 2008 to 2018 the number of community housing properties have doubled.

The condition and management of public housing properties are regulated by the State Government. This is different to social/community housing which is managed by private (usually Christian) organisations. These organisations are accountable to no one except themselves.

The living standards and conditions for community housing are different for each organisation, and are often much worse in community VS public housing, as there is no standardisation or objective third party to oversee them. Provider company policies are poorly explained to tenants and can change unpredictably. If policies are breached,



community housing landlords tend to be more strict and inflexible than the government, meaning tenants are punished more severely.

One example of the problem with privatising public housing was made infamous by the Bendigo St Campaign. This involved a charity called Magpie's Nest (a small front group of the Salvation Army), who were given control over some government owned properties in Bendigo St, after 800 properties were acquired (and almost all left vacant) for the failed East West Link project.

It was later found that Magpie Nest was mismanaging the properties, leaving them empty and even offering houses to its own employees and their friends and families.

The 2016 Bendigo Street campaign was a political protest that involved the occupation of over 15 government owned houses that were compulsorily acquired for the defunct East-West Link highway project. Throughout the course of the campaign, Indigenous people, squatters, activists, people with a lived experience of homelessness, rough sleepers, and people who traversed all these categories at once, banded together to utilise empty properties that were left to rot. They sparked state-wide discussions about housing affordability, homelessness, and the coloniality of our housing system. Hundreds of people were housed by the campaign during an 8 month period, before they were forcibly evicted.<sup>1</sup> Bendigo Street occupies the unceded land of the Wurundjeri people, in the inner-northern suburb of Collingwood in Naarm (aka Melbourne) in so-called Australia.

## Lack of Equity

Equity of housing is another major problem with privatisation. Community housing providers can pick and choose who they accept as tenants, and aren't as obliged to take tenants on the basis of need. They can make their own wait lists from private sources and may have few (if any) homeless individuals on them. Their decisions are usually based on ableist and classist criteria and they aren't under an obligation to offer housing to those who are homeless or have been waiting for housing for several years.

People with greater incomes and less accessibility needs are more appealing to community housing organisations because they cost less money to accommodate and bring in more funds to the organisation. This is in contrast to the state, which must take all tenants from the public housing register and then prioritise in relation to level of need.

## Cost differences

Unlike in public housing, community housing tenants often don't have the right to a rent reduction if their income or employment circumstances change. Rent for people in public

housing is 25% of the tenant's total income. If the person's income goes down, so does their rent.

In community housing, organisations charge up to 30%, and then add questionable 'fees' to this. Tenants also have to pay service charges, for basic maintenance and upkeep which would normally be covered by rent. On top of this they're made to apply for Commonwealth Rent Assistance, of which the full amount has to be paid to the community housing provider on top of the rent. This means that residents in community housing routinely pay almost half their income to private housing providers.



## Long term problems

Social housing is also less stable than public housing, as residents aren't granted tenure. Once ten years have passed, community housing providers can choose to use the properties however they want to, which means they can sell them or raise rents without a limit.

This has obvious implications for the housing sector, and makes it even more worrying that public housing properties are being handed over to private community housing landlords; who will probably sell most (if not all) of these properties to private buyers once the 10 year period is up.

Bolts and fences are used to 'defend' public housing properties from 'squatters', meaning homeless people (often women escaping DV), from having the audacity to make use of an unused public housing resource, in the middle of a housing crisis. HUSK crew come across abandoned housing estates like this regularly. Government workers deliberately sabotage properties, destroying otherwise working plumbing, boarding up windows and ripping out power boxes, so that the property becomes unlivable.<sup>2</sup>

Anyone making use of the empty property is forcefully evicted by police, without being

supported into alternative housing. We have been evicted ourselves from these properties on multiple occasions, the most 'help' we received from The Department was a one-sided sheet of paper with a list of phone numbers to housing services (most of which were not in service). Unsurprisingly, the few organisations who answered the phone told us they could or would not offer us any housing.

Security are paid by the hour (with tax-payer funds) to patrol the grounds of empty public housing estates to make sure they remain empty, uncared for and useless to the public. Hundreds of residents have been evicted from their family homes and communities over the past few years, so that properties can be sold off to private developers.

Rather than allowing people to stay in their homes until the scheduled work date (or near enough), the state government has repeatedly chosen to evict people years before they have any intention (or legal permission) to sell off or begin work on a property or estate. The result is these homes sit empty, degrading and becoming a target of vandalism.

### But residents are being offered alternative accommodation aren't they?

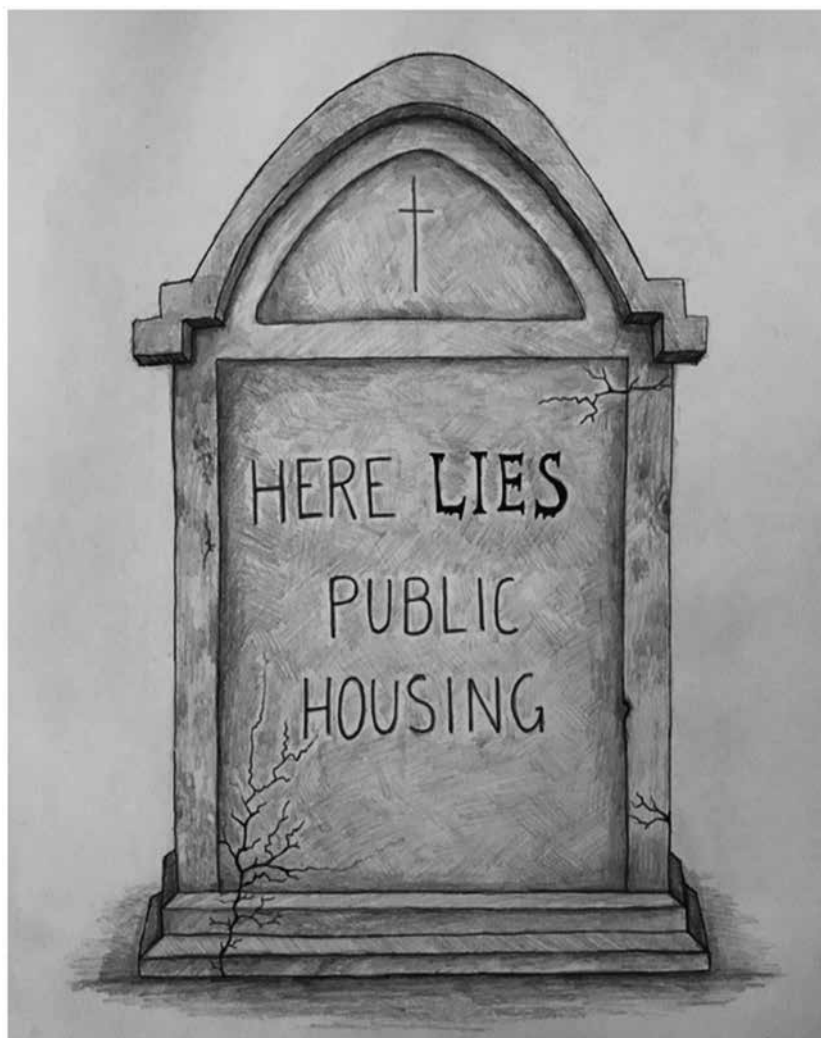
Nope. It's up to the discretion of individual case workers to help find evictees new housing, or not. If you've ever met someone who works for the Department of Housing or a large mainstream housing charity/organisation, you may be aware how unhelpful some of these workers can be.

The housing that has been offered to those being evicted is generally much smaller and further away from the city (suburbs like Geelong, Seaford, Pakenham etc).

Large families with several adults and children were/are being offered 1 or 2 bedroom units located way out on the periphery of the Melbourne region. When they turn down one of these ridiculous offers, they are then removed from the housing list, due to 'refusing suitable accommodation' and left on their own.

Having always lived in the inner suburbs, many people don't have/can't afford cars, can't drive and can't afford the enormously high cost of a daily return V-line (or even metro train/bus) to get to work each day. Their support networks, services, doctors, jobs, schools, universities and extra-curriculars are all centred around where they live. As with anyone else, these people have built their lives around their homes.

HUSK ran a free shop and grocery from donated and dumpstered goods outside one of these inner-city estates throughout 2019. We got to hear many of these tenants' stories first-hand, and we watched sadly as a vibrant multicultural



housing estate community was turned into a dilapidated ghost town.

Mothers regularly came to our stall crying and begging for housing assistance after receiving little or no support from their case managers or the Department of Housing. Many of these women were refugees who had suffered enormous amounts of trauma. Simple things like translation services for people who were unable to speak English were being completely disregarded by The Department, many people (English and non-English speaking) had no idea what was happening and had no way to organise alternative accommodation.

Once the government had unilaterally decided (without any of the necessary permits or permissions), to demolish and sell off inner city public housing complexes, The Department of Housing stopped maintaining these properties. This meant that the complexes were left to degrade for years prior to any actual work beginning on the estates, while people were still living in them. An investigation by The New Daily shows the rate of decline in conditions after the announcement was made.<sup>3</sup>

The report talks about Gronn Place, one of the estates HUSK visited often. The issues the investigators talk about match with what we saw; there were several apartments with untreated black mould, severe leaks, piles of rubbish including hazardous waste, blocked drains, flooding leaking into lights and sockets tripping



power and a lot more problems, and nothing was done about it.

It seemed clear to us that aside from general neglect and a callous disregard by The Department for resident's safety and quality of life, the inhabitable conditions were also being used as a tactic to make it easier to move on residents prematurely, and therefore expedite the approval process for the works.

In media reports, the state government even tried to justify the sell-off of public housing estates by saying they had "fallen into disrepair" and so residents had to be evicted "for their own safety."

What the government failed to mention was that the buildings had only become dilapidated and damaged beyond repair AFTER the state stopped maintaining them, AFTER they had already begun the process of selling them off.

### But won't these properties be improved and rebuilt for the benefit of residents?

Nope. There are no plans to increase the number of public housing properties available in any meaningful way, in fact for most estates, the amount of housing will actually decrease. The government is also selling off large sections of what is currently designated for public housing to the private housing sector.

The average wait list for public housing is already 10- 15 years long, yet the government is selling off what little public housing there is to property developers for a profit.

In the past 5 years, a significant amount of public housing has been assigned to community housing organisations. Housing should be the responsibility of the state government, but when the state shirks its responsibilities and offloads them onto private organisations, the result is mismanagement and a lack of oversight and accountability.

If you would like to get active around this issue or want to show solidarity with those who are, **consider making your own campaign to bring back public housing** (online group or page, hold an action at a vacant estate or other public housing property, host a film screening). **Or, offer support to existing groups and campaigns:**

*HUSK: Help HUSK provide shelter, food, material aid, practical support and act in solidarity with people of marginalised genders who have been affected by the public housing crisis. Email: [info@husk.house](mailto:info@husk.house);*

*Facebook: [facebook.com/huskcollective](https://www.facebook.com/huskcollective);*

*Insta: [husk\\_housingsupport](https://www.instagram.com/husk_housingsupport);*

*Website: [husk.house](https://www.husk.house);*

*Financial support:*

*HUSK SUPPORT | BSB 313 140 | ACC 1235 9547*

*Save Public Housing Collective:*

*Insta: [savepublichousingcollective](https://www.instagram.com/savepublichousingcollective);*

*Facebook: [The Save Public Housing Collective](https://www.facebook.com/savepublichousingcollective);*

*Email: [savepublichousing@gmail.com](mailto:savepublichousing@gmail.com);*

*Website: [www.savepublichousing.com](https://www.savepublichousing.com)*

**Learn more about Bendigo St,  
and the forthcoming documentary:**  
[www.bendigost.com](https://www.bendigost.com)

1. Barzani, J., [www.bendigost.com](https://www.bendigost.com)

2. Eddie, Rachel, "Urine through the light sockets and black mould: The state of public housing", The New Daily, 5 March 2019, <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/state/vic/2019/03/05/public-housing-renewal-maintenance/>

3. ibid



Reflections on rooting change-making into our daily lives, as a means of living the future now.

## Interview: Landlords and Redistribution

Aia Newport and Nic Carson

*Aia sat down with Nic to talk about landlords, redistribution, and personal experiences of housing.*

**First off, what has your experience of housing been throughout your life and how do you think this has shaped your current views on housing?**

I've always lived in precarious rentals, even as a kid growing up, struggling to cover rent. The one time my family owned a house it didn't last long – my dad got really sick, lost his job for a few years, and nearly died. My mum worked more but it wasn't enough to keep up the mortgage payments, so we had to sell the house. Another time, we were made homeless by a house fire and it took a fair while for us to be accepted for another rental. Since leaving home I've lived in a long string of pretty terrible housing, most often evicted for developments or to accommodate the wishes of landlords who want to move into the areas. Some of these houses were not legally habitable, several violated building safety standards, and some were squatted. In one place I lived in, my bedroom window was 2 meters from a major highway and our entire house regularly filled with brake dust, while a plastics factory illegally emitted who-knows-what toxic gaseous substances that also filled our house. For me, housing has always been tenuous, temporary, and an incredibly stressful fight to obtain and to

hold onto. I cannot understand why anyone would choose to extort rent from people who need a home to live in, it's so unnecessary.

**You currently live in Mparntwe where there's a big queer community. As a genderqueer trans femme with a working class family and upbringing, do you notice differences in the way you approach housing to other queer people in town and how does this impact your daily life?**

My class location, my poverty, stands out in town. It's a strange mix where there's quite a large LGBTIQA+ community that can access higher paid work, or at least more work than they can in the big cities. This community overlaps with a population of cis/hetero professionals earning enough to at least afford a mortgage, if not get into the property market as investors. So queers in town are generally more class privileged, or at least higher waged, and have closer proximity to class privilege – meaning many of us can access better housing than we can in the big cities. But there still exists a class divide, particularly for trans and gender diverse people, and many of us still can't imagine property ownership, or struggle to find any housing, competing with some fairly well off cis/het working professionals and white/western families that get preferential treatment in the housing and rental market. We still end up living in the strange houses, the cracks, the sheds



and caravans, subletting, housesitting, or if we're lucky enough, big sprawling share houses where we can afford rent. In comparison to the big cities, it's definitely easier, though we are currently experiencing a shortage of cheap and affordable rentals as landlords – sometimes LGBTIQ+ landlords – keep trying to squeeze more and more rent out of us. Rent is much more expensive than it should be, and it's not just due to the good wages, military and mining jobs in town. Greed and extortion on behalf of landlords is rampant, particularly among those who own 4 or 7 or 12 properties. You'd think once you had that many houses you'd give some away instead of upping the rents that are lining your pockets and allowing you to buy yet more houses, go on extended holidays, buy expensive 4WDs and retire early. I'm sick to death of what little wages I get being extorted for the luxuries and excesses of the class privileged. This disgraceful property investment game has got to stop, and it's something that can change without changing government policies and laws.

**Mparntwe has quite a dynamic population with local mob from many different nations as well as middle class settlers, recent immigrants from Africa and Asia, rich pine gap workers and a sea of transient workers. How do you think these different groups can work together to access or redistribute housing?**

The community as a whole needs to implement community-controlled arrangements to cap rents and redistribute excess housing owned by investors. If we're organised in this way we will also be able to place pressure on governments to build more public housing, legally cap rents and remove financial incentives for investment. This is just a question of getting organised and taking control of our collective lives.

**What do you see as the main barriers to affordable and accessible housing for all in the central deserts?**

- Discrimination during rental application processes.
- Lack of caps on rents to keep them low, whether imposed by government or communities.
- Severe shortage of public housing. There shouldn't be any waiting lists.

- Impacts of class inequality, largely along lines of race due to ongoing colonisation.
- Extortion and rent increases imposed particularly by property investors, multi-property owners.

**What have you seen people doing in their everyday lives that address these barriers?**

There is a mutual-aid network in Mparntwe, and much of its response and support work is addressing issues stemming from lack of public housing, high rents and displacement of Aboriginal people from their homelands. Mutual-aid is a fantastic way people can directly help and support each other in the community across lines of race and class.

**What do you think people can do in their day to day life, whether they live in the central deserts or elsewhere, to contribute to a society that provides housing for all?**

People need to stop discriminating against Aboriginal people and LGBTIQ+ people, particularly trans and gender diverse people and young people, so we can access rentals and basic housing. Those who own multiple properties need to start collectivising and redistributing that property to people who don't own a home, particularly to Aboriginal people. We need to start instituting our own community-based arrangements to cap rents, to prioritise those who desperately need housing. There's so many ways we can do these things, and we don't need to wait for governments to act. That being said, governments are failing in their responsibilities to provide basic housing, to properly regulate the private property market, and to reign in extortion and profit taking. Tent caps and big increases in public housing are two things governments need to jump on immediately. They can't move too fast on these things, so let's see them happen overnight.

**Nic** is a genderqueer writer and troublemaker living between wurundjeri & arrernte lands, who has been involved in grassroots campaigns that have collectivised buildings to house homeless people, and worked against LGBTIQ+ homelessness.

**Aia** (they/them) was born on Wurrundjeri country and is of Scottish, Welsh, and English descent. They live on stolen Arrernte Country. Get in contact at [sunshine.punch@protonmail.com](mailto:sunshine.punch@protonmail.com).

## Rewilding the Urban Soul: searching for the wild in the city – Book Excerpts

Claire Dunn

### Excerpt from Chapter 8

The tube train jerks suddenly to the right, and my right thigh rips up like a bandaid from where it was stuck to the seat. I forgot how unpleasantly stifling the London underground is in summer. It's like an old carnival ghost train. My jetlagged state only amplifies the sensation of being suffocated. The lack of phone reception doesn't create the congeniality I would have expected in such a shared ordeal, and my warm glances are met with groggy, half-closed eyes. This is obviously where people catch up on their sleep in this city. At last, the train pulls up in Leyton, the east London suburb where my friend and old housemate Arian is now living.

• • •

'Look at us — two city slickers now,' I say as a loud plane flies overhead.

'I know, who'd have thought?' Arian says, smiling broadly.

'So, how's life for you in the big smoke?'

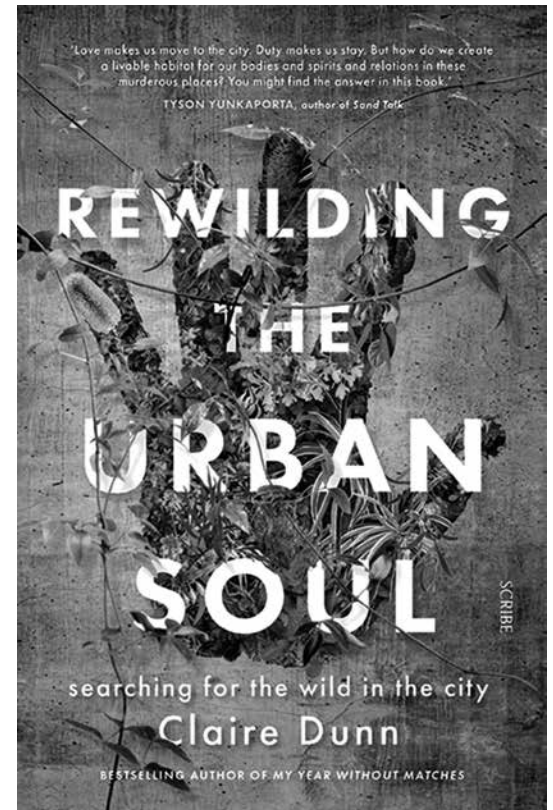
'Oh, Wren, it's just so enlivening in so many ways, but it's a terrible lifestyle — terrible! Look at my body,' he says, showing me a tiny bit of loose flab under his biceps. 'No muscles left at all. I tried going to the gym, but it was ghastly. It was like separating out in robotic sequence every section of a movement that I would naturally do with my timber work in the forest, and repeating it. Like a production line.'

The forest. There's a shared understanding of what we mean when we say those words.

'I was disorientated for quite a while. I came to realise that to really encounter the city, I had to come to terms with the immense amount of violence that's just everywhere.'

'What do you mean by violence?' I ask.

'Separation. Disconnection. One of first things I perceived was that the entire landscape is



sliced and diced. What we're used to in the forest is this continuity of energy fields. It gradually changes as we move through it, but there are no beginnings and endings. But the city is like getting out a pineapple and a whole bunch of fruit and dicing it up into fruit salad, and all the bits are juxtaposed in incredibly intricate cubes. Rooms, houses, roads, cars, time itself, all the spaces are boundaried. Walking a street one day, it struck me it was an industrial drain — a passageway dominated by steel boxes on wheels for goods and objects and humans to move through, an industrial service conduit, for all the stuff that both feeds and is excreted by the house. But,' he says, sitting up in his chair and gesticulating with his hands, 'I realised the boundaries also enable twelve million people to live side by side in almost complete harmony. Just think about it — yes, there's crime, but there's billions of interactions going on in close proximity day after day, with very few problematic. It's amazing really! But what we need to remember is the field in which our bodies and imaginations are moving through, this landscape of relational poverty.'

Arian wipes his watering eyes. For a second I think he's crying. 'Pollution,' he says, 'often exceeds health standards.' Mine have been stinging too.

'But yet you're still here ...'

'Awww, Wren, there's a single reason I'm here, and that's for the community. I'm learning about myself in a way I couldn't out bush. I've come to realise that what I came to London in search of was greater embedment. I was embedded in the forest in a way that was delightful and luscious, but I realised I needed my nervous system and body to be in interaction with both land and human ecologies.'



He re-crosses his legs and cups his mug in his hands. I can feel now how he's changed. It's like he's inhabiting his skin more; he's less diffuse, more rested in his seat. This being in the city has been good for him.

'So what is it exactly that you're learning?' I ask, bringing my knees up to my chest to try and stretch a little.

'What I'm exploring is new forms of tribe or community that are based on authenticity — ways to truly share our experience of the world. We're calling it "technologies of affection" — the skills and attitudes that enable us to enact this deeper realness with each other. It's all about pushing at the edges of this western concept of individualism, but instead of taking away personal freedom, we're exploring how to be individuals-in-relation: groups, networks, and communities who recognise we need to be moving beyond what separates us and find how we can stay anchored in all our uniqueness, and from there come into relation with others.'

'So rather than the old model of tightly adhered-to shared social values and norms, seeing how you can connect across difference?'

'Exactly,' says Arian emphatically. 'And what I find immensely exciting now is the shift away from framing authenticity as an individual endeavour and instead incorporating it into the current paradigm shift towards village again. There's a new understanding that personal authenticity enables a new sort of connection with others and thus enables new sorts of communities.'

'It certainly subverts the slicing and dicing and separations,' I say.

'And this is the reality of western culture at the moment — both incredible creativity and richness of personal freedoms within a field of disconnection and material violence on other humans and species. It's a juxtaposition every day for me, but yes, this is what I choose. My life is outrageously rich with a forest of humans, beyond my wildest dreams. That's why I'm here.'

'And I'm authentically celebrating your urban happiness,' I smile.

• • •

Walking the street back to Arian's, I keep thinking I recognise people to the point of calling out to them, before realising they're strangers. It's a thing that I do in foreign cities, my mind scanning for pattern matches like I do habitually with plants and birds. With a jolt of dopamine, I'm startled to recognise someone I saw on my walk to the park.

When I get home, Arian and his flatmates are celebrating the end of the workday in the German tradition of *feierabend* — a drink and a dance to wash off the day, perhaps one of the 'technologies of affection'. I accept a glass of bubbly and smile as I watch Arian chatting and laughing with his city tribe.

'See, this is me rewilding,' he jokes.

'I don't doubt that,' I smile, and it's true. Re-imagining community and human intimacy is at the heart of rewilding. A few generations ago, most likely anywhere on the planet, you would know every single person that you saw, and probably something of their story. It couldn't be more different now. As Sebastian Junger pointed out in his book *Tribes*, a person living in a modern city can, for the first time in history, go through an entire day, or even an entire life, mostly encountering complete strangers. They can be surrounded by others and yet feel deeply, dangerously alone. While we live in closer proximity, we are more socially distant — co-located but disconnected. Social isolation affects one in ten Australians, while one in six experience periods of emotional loneliness. The health impacts of chronic social isolation have the same implications for heart disease and stroke as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day, a UK study has found.

Charles Eisenstein is one of many contemporary philosophers naming the chief crisis of civilisation as a crisis of belonging stemming primarily from the dissolving of community. Modern technology and lifestyle, he says, have pushed us apart in a variety of ways and destroyed the stories that told us who we are and why we're here. 'People don't know who they are, because our identity is built from our relationships,' Eisenstein says. 'Without those relationships and stories, we have a hunger to belong, feel at home, and for identity.' Our innate evolutionary desire, he says, is to be interdependent, not independent.

Jon Young has translated some of the 'technologies of affection' of traditional cultures into practical suggestions, recommending that at the bare minimum we need to experience deep listening to our stories at least three times a day. How many of us actually have this even once a day?

'Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself,' said Carl Jung.

My living arrangement is an intentional choice towards reimagining modern belonging. It's



explicit in the way we choose to share food, gardens, and living spaces, and implicit in the ways we care for each other, and the way our social lives constellate around the home. Sharing a house is a choice we make, not just a product of economic necessity but a desire to live in community. There's a constant flow of people in and out the doors for gatherings and projects. We host potlucks and seasonal celebrations, working bees, parties, clothes swaps, and whatever else anyone has inspiration for. And it takes commitment — to communication, conflict resolution, flexibility, tolerance, and making time. Often, reality falls short of the ideals or expectations. We're in between stories, the experimental narrative of a new form of family co-existing alongside freedom and self-reliance.

Outside the house, I've nestled myself within various community niches with broad overlapping interests in embodiment, nature, human psychology, healing, sexuality, and creativity. It's a kind of loose ecosystem with clusters of affinity and belonging. We live, work, play, and relate together. The foundational shared value is community itself, self-referential in its purpose.

If technology has been part of the divide, it's also part of the reunion. Facebook is a valuable part of my toolkit. Our suburb has a potluck-dinner group, which extends into requests and offers for airport pick-ups, house-moving help, sharing excess produce, and spontaneous social adventures. The Rewild Friday crew regularly post observations, questions, and stories on our group page. Feedback is almost instant. This controversial commercial web allows me to organise, communicate, and connect with fluidity.

This is the reason I'm living urban. I came to know myself in the forest in the way only possible when reflected day after day by the untainted mirror of moonlight, river flow, granite stone, and whitening bone, stripping me back to reveal the unconditioned and uncivilised core of my being. Returning to the village, I've been putting the flesh back on my bones, exploring who I am via the mirror of the diverse human

ecologies of the city. My adventurousness has found avenues in the relational, emotional, and vocational realms that provide opportunities equally as alluring and dangerous. It's another kind of experimental laboratory, bubbling with all the myriad ways we create, organise and arrange ourselves in the city. It's not the wildness of stalking the dark woods, but it's an equally fertile tension exploring authenticity and creative expression within the human hives and niches. I've come to locate myself in the way Arian has, through the affections and feedback of the human gaze.

## Excerpt from Chapter 9

A train rumbles overhead, and I lean into the side of the enormous brick pylon that I'm standing under. The park is empty, and I check my phone, wondering if I've got the right place. Enterprize Park, this is it. I wasn't quite expecting it to be a postage-stamp patch of grass sandwiched between river and train station. A man with a goatee wearing a small black daypack appears down near the edge of the park, taking photos. That must be Dean. He turns around as I start walking towards him, and gives me a nod.

'G'day,' he says, extending one hand in my direction with a broad smile, the other hand holding a takeaway coffee cup. Dean Stewart is a Wemba Wemba-Wergaia man who runs cultural tours in and around Melbourne and has offered to take me on a walk.

'Welcome to my office,' he says proudly, black curls protruding from under his cap. 'The place where the first white settlers came to Melbourne in 1836. This is where the cultural tsunami began.'

'This was the exact place of their landing?' I ask, my words drowned out in the rumble of another train passing metres over our head.

'Yep. Sure was,' says Dean with a slight grimace. 'Imagine us standing in waist-high grass. Behind us would be a wattle and eucalypt forest, emus and kangaroos moving through. Further back,' Dean says, pointing towards Flagstaff Gardens, 'was a primeval she-oak forest, and another to the south at what's now called Emerald Hill. Both would have been gathering and ceremony grounds.'

With this last suggestion, my imagination conjures a full sensory experience. The ring of she-oaks on the rise, the wind breathing the sweet whisper of the needle leaves down to the lowlands in invitation.

'And where they call Docklands, over there,' he says, his thick arm becoming signpost again, 'was a giant salt lake — a major migratory

route for birds. Floods washed out this entire region. The tea-tree flats would have seen barren geese, black swans, swamp wallabies, wombats, bandicoots, spotted quolls.'

My imagination soars above the city. Weeding out the skyscrapers, I see the land exposed in all its wrinkles, bulges, and folds. Dean leads me around the construction fencing and down to the river's edge near the busy Queen Street bridge.

'This bridge is where the river and ocean once met at a set of waterfalls made from giant basalt rocks, before settlers dynamited them,' Dean says. It's harder to imagine. He's a practiced storyteller, though, inviting me to imagine the song of the waterfall changing with the tides. 'The river changes so frequently. Sometimes, it's just brown or so thick you could walk across it. And other times, it's virtually crystal clear, depending on the currents and the weather. Sometimes, all you can smell is the sea.'

Dean's tone softens as he begins to recount his own observations of the place.

'I've seen a dolphin here once. There's a seal that visits every year. There's snapper and barracuda. And see those gulls,' he says, pointing to a dozen or so birds gathered in the middle of the river. 'They're always in that spot. There must be an upwelling of some kind. I've only ever met one person, a birdo on a tour, who had also noticed that.'

I grow more intrigued as I realise Dean is speaking not just of historical belonging, but of contemporary experience.

Dean walks me over to the side of the river wall and points down. There's a small section of rocks to one side, a duck sitting on a piece of junk.

'You wouldn't know it, but these are the remnants of an important cultural and geological site — the only remaining rocks of the waterfall that separated river from ocean. These rocks are 1.2 million years old. There's a male and female swan here at certain times of the year with a gosling, teaching it how to eat the algae. I also love seeing the migratory welcome swallows here, nesting under the bridge. A pied currawong has come in the last eighteen months, and I've noticed it uses the alcoves of the buildings to amplify its song.'

'Really, you've seen it? That's amazing!'

'And listen to that,' he says, turning his head back across the river.

I pause and listen. 'You mean the rainbow lorikeets?'

Dean looks at me astonished. 'Well, you're one in a million. Seriously, barely one of the twelve thousand people I show around here every year can identify that sound when I point it out.' It's

as if I've passed some test, and Dean grows more animated. 'Every individual who once lived here would have known the name of every plant and bird and animal, as well as the seasonal indicators. They knew it as intimately as you know your neighbourhood — the street names and houses. The elders used to say that it's written twice — once on the land and once in the stars.'

The sentiment fills me with wonder. Once on the land and once in the stars. How exquisite. It's poetry to me and I'm in awe of those for whom who truly did read the patterns of nature via both land and sky.

'Traditionally, everything had a song and a dance and a story. Like the waterfall here. That's how things were remembered. Think about when a song comes on the radio that you haven't heard for fifteen years and the chorus just comes straight back to you. Songs stick.'

'And where do you hear the song of the land loudest?' I ask.

'Right here, mate!' he says emphatically. 'I know this place better than anywhere.'

It occurs to me that this man might know this piece of country smack bang in the middle of the city better than anyone, even though his particular lineage is from another part of the state. It gets me thinking again about what it means to be indigenous. I pluck up the courage to ask what feels like an edgy question.

'What does being indigenous mean to you?'

Dean adjusts his cap and looks out to the ducks on the river.

'At the end of every school tour, I ask that of the year-nine kids. They'll say things like "ancient" and "Aboriginal". And then I'll ask them to put their hand up if they were born in Melbourne and tell them: guess what, you're indigenous, you belong — and instantly their eyes open up and it's a gamechanger. I tell them that fifteen-year-olds have been walking on this landscape listening to the waterfall and the lorikeets and to an old guy talk about their connection to place for thousands of years. I tell them: you are the newest custodians of this place.'

A flock of silvereyes fly into the bushes next to us, and we both stop to listen and look. Dean turns around and gives me a wink.

'This is reconciliation in action for me, us as a people reconciling ourselves back to the land. We're all caretakers, we're all custodians.'

*"Rewilding the Urban Soul: searching for the wild in the city" is published by Scribe, 2021.*

**Claire** is a writer, speaker, barefoot explorer, rewilding facilitator and founder of Nature's Apprentice. [www.naturesapprentice.com.au](http://www.naturesapprentice.com.au)



# FROM THE ARCHIVES



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## ENDEAVOUR HILLS

Endeavour Hills is the latest addition to Melbourne's urban sprawl. A new suburb about 32 km from the city centre, it is being developed on 420 hectares of yesterday's farmland near the town of Dandenong, formerly 'gateway to Gippsland', now front gate to Melbourne. The new Mulgrave freeway forms one of the suburb's boundaries.

One of the houses at Endeavour Hills will be the celebrated "Low-Energy Home", the winning design in a recent competition sponsored by the Victorian Gas and Fuel Corporation, ACI Ltd. (an insulation firm) and *The Age* newspaper. But, we wondered, how much energy will the low-energy home dwellers be using for transport?

A recent survey of households in Sydney (*Search*, 7 (1-2), p. 35, 1976) showed that by far the largest fraction of direct household energy consumption, 68%, was in the form of petrol for the car(s), compared with only 32% for all other purposes, including heating, lighting, cooking etc. The situation in Endeavour Hills, which is designed around the motor car, is unlikely to be radically different.

It's not that Endeavour Hills is any worse than a typical suburb, more that it is so very similar, that will make its residents almost totally dependent on their cars for getting around.

Schools, a kindergarten, parkland and a large shopping centre, will be located within the area of the estate, although except for a few walkways the network of streets and courts is clearly designed for motor car mobility. As a publicity leaflet points out: "To really appreciate Endeavour Hills you have to drive around it in your car."

In fact, for most of the journeys within the estate, bicycles would have been ideally suited — inclines are never great, neither are the distances. No special provision for bicycles seems to have been made.

Dandenong, a likely destination for many trips, is 5 km away, but the Mulgrave Freeway bordering the south-western corner of the new suburb prevents direct access to the town along the quickest route. Residents are forced instead to traverse a circuitous route on already crowded roads.

A considerable proportion of the transport energy used by Hills' people will probably be on trips to work. A house salesperson on the estate

## BEYOND THE



told us that workplace locations for residents so far fell into three main categories: Dandenong, the middle suburban area around Oakleigh, Clayton and Huntingdale, and the city or inner suburbs.

He wouldn't hazard a guess at the breakdown between these categories, but said practically everyone used a car to get to work. The bus service for the estate is slow and infrequent, and has recently been downgraded to an even lower frequency.

People travel to the middle suburbs such as Clayton via the Mulgrave Freeway. A developers' brochure promises that the latter will "whisk you into the city of Melbourne in around 30 minutes", presumably assuming that the present 10 km gap between the South-Eastern and Mulgrave Freeways will eventually be bridged in spite of the opposition of the citizens in its path.

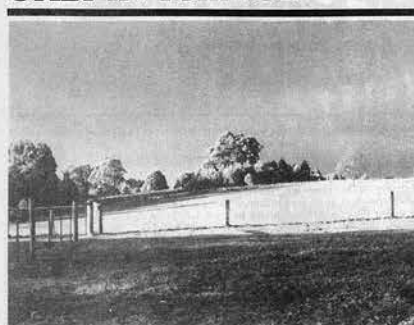
Terry Williamson and Willy

Span, the architects of the low-energy home, calculate that it will operate on about 37% of the total annual energy requirements of an average home. 80% of the annual energy for hot water comes from a 4.8 m<sup>2</sup> array of solar collectors (see *The Age*, April 4, 1977). However, if we assume the breakdown for total (i.e. including petrol) direct household energy consumption quoted earlier, then the annual saving is reduced to about 20% of the total.

This wasn't part of the competition, but where you site 'low-energy houses' in relation to the needs of their residents — for work, education, community etc. — is all important if the energy savings are to be really significant from a national point of view.

As Willy Span wryly suggested to us: "In ten years' time, people may not even be able to live in Endeavour Hills because of the cost of petrol."

## URBAN FRINGE



### MOORA MOORA

The Moora Moora Co-operative Community at Healesville, Victoria, is a group of people who are creating an alternative to suburban living. With a current membership of 34 people and planned size of 60 residents, the co-operative owns 245 hectares of mountain-top land about 65 km north-east of Melbourne.

A planning permit for 30 dwellings has been issued to the co-operative, and at present three low-cost homes are being constructed from natural materials. The community's publicity leaflet reads:

"We are designing homes in six clusters, where communes, families and individuals can build clustered together in harmony with the environment. Our energy will also be drawn from the environment — from the sun, wind and water."

One Moora Moora member, Peter Cook, sees personal development in an alternative community as "taking responsibility for one's own existence".

"From nature we get our shelter, our food and our clothing," he writes.

"Struggling with the ingredients of survival is not only a prerequisite to personal growth, it is also an essential part of it."

At Moora Moora some members are growing their own food while

others buy health foods. Some recycle op-shop clothes; others are starting to spin their own wool. Naturopathy, herbal remedies and other 'natural health' measures are practised where it is felt to be appropriate. Work is not seen as an end itself, but a means to an end. Some members work part-time and others are able to structure their work to suit their needs. Education is being developed as part of community life.

Bicycles are used on the property and occasionally to get to Healesville, but rural communities in particular find a need for cars, especially during the period when they are building and settling in. So transport is a contentious issue at Moora Moora.

Members of the community are sensitive to the visual and atmospheric impact of cars but are finding the need, in some cases, to have more than one car per two people.

Neil Collier lives at the co-operative and works full-time as a teacher at Ringwood High School about 48 km away. His wife Fran is full-time matron of the Upper Yarra Bush Nursing Hospital at Yarra Junction. At present, they have a VW beetle between them, Fran sleeps in at the hospital. This is proving unsatisfactory for them and they are now considering buying a Suzuki

4WD so that Fran can be home more often.

Mike and Dorothy Evans are also toying with the idea of buying another car, unregistered, for lugging tools and building materials around the property.

Peter and Sandra own a Holden station wagon. They both work three days a week, Peter at Monash University (staying in Melbourne two nights) and Sandra at Lilydale. Peter is against owning more than one car on principle and has suggested that the community should agree to a policy to that effect. He would prefer to encourage cars to be owned on a 'cluster basis'.

Phillip Ross commutes to his work at the Healesville Sanctuary three days a week by bicycle. If he or his wife Pam need the use of a car, they borrow one belonging to other members.

Leigh Norman, a mechanic, has three cars. He is unemployed because he wants to direct all his energies to improving the property and he has no money. So he uses his cars very rarely and often takes a lift to Healesville with another member. He'd prefer not to leave the property at all.

And I own two motor bikes, but (particularly in winter) I often take lifts with other members of the community.

As Peter Cook wrote in the Moora Moora newsletter: "We are really dependent on the automobile, even though a few strong-bodied people have ridden their bicycles up the mountain and even walked up. Where we can cut down on pollution and consumption is in converting our cars to LP gas and by car pooling and sharing."

But it is important to stress that Moora Moora is in its early stages. Eventually the members of the community see a high proportion of their needs being satisfied within the area of the co-operative. For travel outside this area, they will need an efficient public transport system, in common with other rural, and urban, communities.

Neil Collier sums it up: "The people working full-time down below both can afford and are in more need of a car than those working part-time. I look forward to the day when I no longer need a car."

Mark Snell.

For more information, contact Moora Moora, P.O. Box 214, Healesville, 3777, or on (059) 62 4104 newsletter sub, \$3 a year.

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## Who's Reading CR?

Ariel Sallah

I've been reading CR since the early 80s and first published on ecofeminism with you back then. One of these early pieces was about Greenham Common Peace Camp in the UK. FOE is central to my political concerns, just as women are central to ecology! As the Kurdish women say 'Jin, Jiyan, Azadi!' or Women-Life-Peace.

View Ariel's scholarly work on transdisciplinary feminist political ecology: [www.arielsalleh.info](http://www.arielsalleh.info).

## 'Who's Reading Chain Reaction?'

Let's learn more about the Chain Reaction community! Submit a photo with a sentence about you, and response to the questions: 'when/where did you first read Chain Reaction?', 'what does FOE/Chain Reaction mean to you?' 'what environmental/social justice/alternative world building projects are you working on at the moment?'

Send to [chainreaction@foe.org.au](mailto:chainreaction@foe.org.au). Include your name and location.

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# Art Auction

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[www.melbournefoe.org.au/2023\\_art\\_auction](http://www.melbournefoe.org.au/2023_art_auction)

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