

Living Together

RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT

Acknowledgment of Country

RMIT PlaceLab acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University.

RMIT PlaceLab respectfully acknowledges their Ancestors and Elders, past and present, as the original and continuing Makers of Place.

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RMIT PlaceLab initiative

RMIT PlaceLab is a new urban initiative connecting community, shaping place and taking a radically different approach to research.

Designed to free research from the campus and bring researchers street-side to connect with local government and groups, RMIT PlaceLab facilitates site-based research to support the co-creation of new ideas, partnerships, and systems that grow positive community impact.

Dynamic, actionable and accessible, RMIT PlaceLab research projects are bite-size and community-engaged, generating insights, ideas and solutions that can be implemented together with our government and place-making partners.

Living Together Research Project

Key research themes and issues:

1. Urban Liveability;
2. Environmental Issues; and
3. Sustainability.

The above key research themes and issues, all important to the RMIT PlaceLab initiative, led to the collaborative project **Living Together** with academics from RMIT's School of Architecture and Urban Design, Rebecca Roke and Associate Professor Richard Black.

Living Together is an investigation into socially sustainable housing in Brunswick. It explores collective (or deliberative) housing – a model focused on sharing and living together – as an alternative approach to housing that has emerged in Melbourne over the last 10 years. This research investigates the potential for deliberative development and how it might address issues concerning affordability, sustainability, and urbanisation in the Brunswick neighbourhood.

The research is undertaken in the context of global climate change, ongoing challenges of housing affordability in Australia and, more locally, Melbourne's forecast population growth. Centred around the real-world conditions of Brunswick, **Living Together** explores the existing context of land availability and ecology, local character, and local housing needs. It looks for opportunities of shared resources in deliberative housing at various scales and types, and associated improvements and advantages, including:

- Quality housing at competitive prices,
- Greater opportunity for diverse housing types,
- Increased accessibility to outdoor space,
- The creation of eco-corridors, and
- The accommodation of more varied demographics.

The Brunswick precinct was an ideal test site for **Living Together**: a hyper-local research inquiry within a local community neighbourhood currently experiencing significant densification and transformation.

Living Together forms part of a wider doctoral research investigation by Rebecca Roke that explores the role and impact of shared resources in Melbourne's collective housing. For RMIT PlaceLab, the research scope drew on the broader themes and findings of this PhD with a focus on case study housing within the neighbourhoods of Brunswick and Brunswick East. These inner northern suburbs of Melbourne are active sites of collective housing: earlier developments, such as The Commons¹ by Nightingale Housing (2013), began to set precedents in Melbourne, and Australia, for how housing at density may be designed and procured differently to typical speculative, market-led models.

The research should be read in the context of a measurable increase of collective housing in Melbourne's middle-ring suburbs since 2010 (Giannini 2011). Instead of focusing on dwellings as purely speculative financial tools, collective models aim to offer alternative housing strategies that encourage durable social networks and sustainable living practices based on an attitude towards sharing (Jarvis 2011). A principal intention behind collective housing, also known in Australia as deliberative development (Alves 2020; Riley 2018; Sharam et al. 2015), is a greater reliance on shared resources. Its expression borrows from international precedents, such as Danish co-housing (Bofællesskaber), German Baugruppe, and Swiss models of cooperative housing. The approach to sharing encompasses three principal areas: land, social capital, and amenities.

This study identifies the integral notion of sharing in collective housing as an 'economy of shared resources' and aims to understand how this occurs in projects – and to what lived effect. The approach borrows from a growing area of design knowledge, social value, which considers the relation between human life and form, as investigated by pioneers including Jan Gehl (Wagner 2017) and Flora Samuel (RIBA and Hay 2016; Samuel 2022; Serin et al. 2018). Sharing typically occurs at a range of scales and in different ways. For example, collective housing usually produces private homes that are smaller than average homes on a comparable sized land plot; incorporate areas given over to shared open or planted spaces; and include common facilities, such as multi-purpose shared rooms, shared laundries, or shared productive gardens. Many collective models also encourage active property management by residents that invites decision-making by consensus (Jarvis 2011). The overall effect aims to inspire connection between residents, and by extension, the creation of a sense of community – or neighbourliness – within a housing complex.

In Australia, the rising popularity and occurrence of collective housing types is mostly seen by residents as a means to buy a home, with an emphasis on quality at a more achievable purchase or rental cost than a speculative counterpart. Equally, collective housing buyers share a distinctive focus on buying a home with above-average environmental performance and construction standards, a heightened sense of community interaction, and (most often for smaller scale developments) collaborative decision-making. Overall, the driving interest for those adopting a different approach to housing is, arguably, to collocate cost and lifestyle choice; balancing quality of life in the context of Australia's rising housing unaffordability (Apps et al. 2021; Ferguson et al. 2016; Infrastructure Victoria 2023; Parkinson et al. 2019).

This research project seeks to integrate observations and findings of the built and social environments, adopting three case studies in Merri-bek as the means to examine this: Davison Collaborative (2020), Nightingale Evergreen (2022) and Balfe Park Lane (2021). Shared resources are explored through relationships between the built environment – the integral design decisions that shape the physical provision of housing – and the residents' lived experience. Together, the research considers how, and if, shared resources of collective housing impact on the everyday experiences of residents.

¹ <https://www.nightingalehousing.org/project/the-commons>

The research methodology was designed to explore shared resources in a selection of collective housing – and their speculative counterparts – in Brunswick and Brunswick East using case study methodology. The research design sought to encompass the ways in which sharing manifested through the collective use of resources, focusing on shared land, amenities, and social capital. To achieve this, the research methods adopted design analysis (creative practice research) to examine how the built environment approached land use, amenities, and spaces, with a particular emphasis on where and how these elements included shared resources.

At the same time, the qualitative research techniques (semi-structured interviews) offered a method to chart the lived experiences of residents, developers, and architects who created and inhabited these housing exemplars. A qualitative approach was considered best suited to understand the lived experience of the participants from the perspective of those who develop, design, and inhabit alternative housing models (Creswell and Poth 2016; Silverman 2013). It was anticipated that gathering data from participants associated with the case studies would take into account the variety of participant experiences due to the design variables identified for each case study. These included aspects such as the different collective housing sizes, neighbourhoods, organisational structures, communal elements, and developer intent. The intention was that this would provide a reliable way to create a purposeful sample (Suri 2011). Further, a purposive strategy for sampling was seen as an appropriate strategy to survey a small number of communities (Ornstein 2013).

The local investigative work for RMIT PlaceLab contributed to a broader research doctoral inquiry to investigate collective housing across Melbourne's middle ring. This doctoral study was guided by topics such as:

- **What key characteristics of shared resources occur in collective housing projects?**
- **In which specific ways does the 'economy of shared resources' occur in each case study?**
- **What are the lived experiences for residents sharing land, amenities, and social capital?**
- **What are the perceived impacts on residents' privacy and their preferred degrees of engagement in collective housing?**
- **How did residents' perceptions of the project match or conflict with their lived experience?**
- **Does the data suggest strategies that may help to improve planning, design, or policy controls for these types of projects?**

Data collection encompassed semi-structured interviews with residents, as well as architects and developers, involved in each case study (noting that in some projects, residents were also the architects; and/or the architect was also the developer). In total, this resulted in interviews with three developers, three architectural practices, and nine residents (noting that the time frame for collection meant that one of the case studies, Nightingale Evergreen, had not been inhabited for a sufficient length of time to undertake full resident interviews).

The inclusion criteria for residents required that participants had inhabited their homes for at least six months, and preferably more than one year. This follows international benchmark guidelines for gathering post-occupancy building data (Deuble and de Dear 2014; RIBA and Hay 2016; University of Westminster and A. Blyth 2006). In other words, all residents had lived through at least one of the more extreme seasonal cycles (summer or winter). In addition, all participating residents were legal adults, aged 18 years or over.

The semi-structured interviews included 15 multiple-choice questions to establish demographic and economic data and 13 open-ended questions about the lived experience of the Brunswick or Brunswick East housing projects, as well as opinions about collective housing more generally. In particular, questions enquired into participant perceptions about the elements of shared amenities, and how often or infrequently they used the amenities in their building, as well as their overall feeling about their project. A semi-structured interview was chosen because it offered a 'window into worlds' format, allowing participants to contribute their own observations or opinions as well as answering pre-set questions. In effect, it meant that participants could paint a personal picture of their world, and themselves (Magnusson and Marecek 2015:7), a quality that was considered especially appropriate for those discussing home environments.

By understanding these questions, the study aimed to illustrate the main ways in which collective housing designs may incorporate shared resources, and how they may be adopted for the greatest benefit to residents, local communities and, at a wider scale, the Merri-bek region.

Drawing on the analysis of identified design strategies and the data of residents' lived experiences, the findings identify architectural strategies that repeat across the case studies – the 'social architecture' – while also expanding on the impacts – intended, and accidental – of these as perceived by participating residents. The social and material are not considered as separate elements; in fact, as we shall see, in subtle and obvious ways, they have an integrated effect on what life is like living together at greater densities.

Design Strategies

Through the research, eight design strategies were identified across the three case studies of the Living Together Research Project. These strategies were consistent with findings for the wider body of doctoral research (eight case studies in total, across Melbourne's middle-ring). The design strategies identify key characteristics of built form, such as an attitude to site planning, as well as functional and lived impacts. The strategies encompass decisions that include an emphasis on integrating a project with context while also preserving connection to community – often by breaking up large built masses; how the scale and arrangement of structures and circulation can amplify passive heating/cooling strategies through dual-aspect homes; a shift in ratio towards more green and open spaces in comparison to the built fabric; and floor planning designed to increase residents' preferred control over degrees of privacy and engagement when living alongside others at greater density.

The eight design strategies are defined as:

- **Shared Outdoors:** Private resident use of collectively owned space.
- **Private Outdoors:** Individual use of private space.
- **Borrowed Outdoors:** Communal resident use of public space.
- **Shared Amenity:** Communal facilities.
- **Flexible Rooms:** Adaptable uses of rooms through functional change.
- **Open Circulation:** Free external movement through building.
- **Building Clusters:** Multiple smaller-scaled volumes to minimise mass and optimise perimeter.
- **Active Ground Plane:** Contribution to neighbourhood and beyond at ground level.

The presence of these design strategies varied according to scale: a complex that is medium-sized (10-30 dwellings) or large (30+ dwellings), for example, has more capacity to support the cost and use of a shared laundry than a small-scale development of several townhouses. Conversely, townhouse developments have more agency regarding shared decision making, or adaptable use of spaces required for car parking; in larger projects, such design features were either eliminated or constituted largely uninhabitable basement-level areas that serve a functional purpose only.

These eight design strategies are discussed thematically across the following three case studies:

4.1 Davison Collaborative – 1 Davison Street, Brunswick

4.2 Nightingale Evergreen – 12 Duckett St, Brunswick

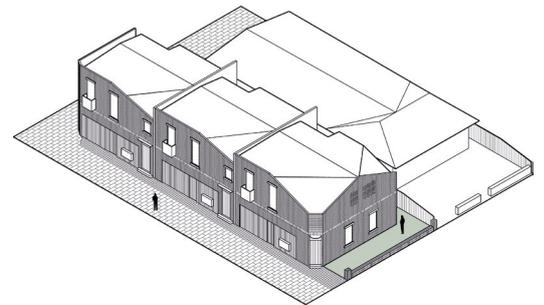
4.3 Balfe Park Lane – 77-83 Nicholson Street, Brunswick East

4.1 Case Study One: Davison Collaborative – 1 Davison Street, Brunswick



Figure 1. Exterior of Davison Collaborative. Note the detached dwelling on comparable plot site adjacent; a similar home used to occupy this site. Image: Tess Kelly

Shared Outdoors



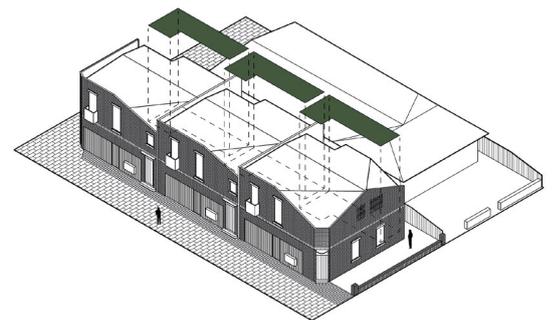
Figures 2a, 2b. One communal front garden is shared between the three townhouses.

Instead of carving up the plot into three small, discrete pieces, the founding residents of this case study chose to collectively pool land to create a shared garden at the street-facing edge of the plot (Figures 1, 2a, 2b). This forms a communal place for residents of all three townhouses to meet and play. This space is used most weeks, particularly by families, and provides a daily green outlook for residents. The street frontage is planted with native and decorative plants, providing continuity in the suburban streetscape and an opportunity to link into the eco-corridor created by adjacent front gardens along Davison Street.



Figure 3. Street boundary fencing is deliberately low to invite neighbourly engagement.
Image: Tess Kelly.

A deliberate and noticeable design element of the shared outdoor area is the low height of the front fence (450mm). Instead of creating a barrier or screen to block out the street, its height and generous width forms an ergonomic place to sit or lie down and invites incidental neighbourly interaction in an everyday way (Figure 3). Anecdotally, it has become a place for kids to balance upon, jump on and off, for neighbours and friends to meet, and even to nap on.

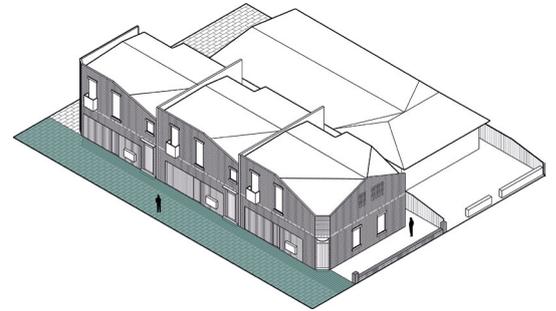


Figures 4a, 4b: Each home has a small private north-facing garden for play and relaxation.

Private Outdoors

In addition to the shared front garden, each home has a small north-facing garden adjacent to the neighbouring boundary (Figures 4a, 4b). Although only c. 3m x 5m in size, this garden provides an enclosed outdoor space for children or pets to play, as well as the positive biophilic effects of a green outlook and access to green, planted areas (Bamford 2011; Nightingale 1861).

Borrowed Outdoors



Figures 5a, 5b: Shared access to and from the laneway maximises the full use of site.

In the city, Melbourne laneways have become a cult attraction but their amenity in a suburban context is often overlooked. The bluestone cobbled lane off Davison Street allowed the design to amplify the plot size, with homes borrowing from this 'forgotten' element to provide direct access to each home (Figures 5a, 5b). The lane itself has become a site to encourage neighbourliness, whether through incidental overlap of residents coming or going from their homes, or – in the case of Melbourne's pandemic lock-downs – as a place to interact at a safe distance with immediate neighbours and those in the homes opposite. The simple function of neighbours along Hope Street rolling up their rear garage doors and meeting Davison Collaborative residents from afar expanded their collective social network during a time of extreme isolation.

Flexible Rooms

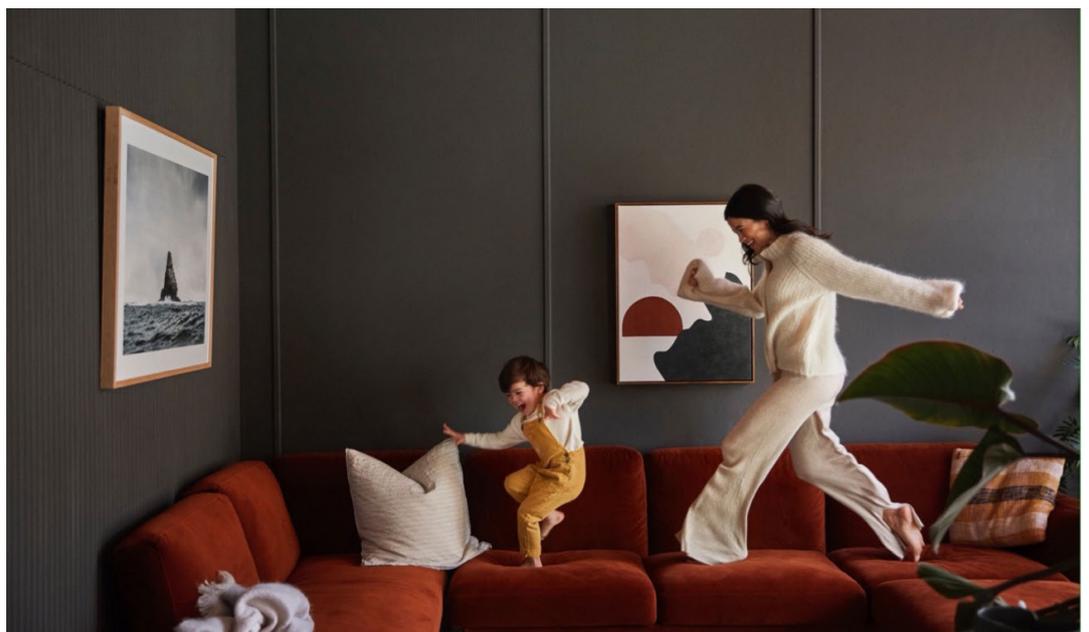


Figure 6a: A garage becomes a living room... Image: Tess Kelly.



Figure 6b: ...and provides room for storage and a workshop.

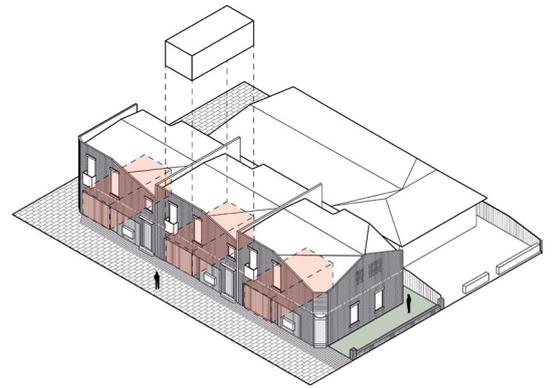


Figure 6c: Garages provide each home with a potential extra room for flexible use.

Current Merri-bek council guidelines required garaging for all homes in this project. Davison Collaborative illustrates an example that adapts this planning policy requirement for practical daily use: the garages have been altered by installing secondary internal walls, which serves several functions, including an extension to the living space (Figure 6a), storage areas and a workshop² (Figure 6b). The space can be reconfigured into garages, if necessary, by simply removing the internal wall opening. This is an exemplary instance of creative adaptation where fixed policy obligations are transformed to suit actual lived conditions (Figure 6c).

Building Clusters



Figure 7a: Gabled roof profiles and bold brick forms articulate the triplet grouping.



Figure 7b: Note the plot to dwelling ratio of townhouses at 1 Davison Street compared to its neighbour, a detached dwelling at 3 Davison Street.

²Notably, a workshop is one facility that is commonly cited on wish lists of residents in collective housing where one is not provided. Projects such as 122 Roseneath Street, Clifton Hill, recognise and include this preference for a dedicated, communal extra space to make or fix messy things outside of private apartments.

By hugging the housing boundaries against the southern and western laneways, the site is organised to maximise space for the three townhouses (Figure 7b). Gabled roof lines clearly articulate each of the three dwellings and adopt a profile that is in keeping with the neighbourhood (Figure 7a). This design detail has prevented the building mass from imparting a blocky presence to the relatively fine, domestic articulation of houses on a residential suburban street. Brick cladding further assists; its bold form clearly marks out the silhouette of the three homes, while also adopting a material palette and hue that is sympathetic to Brunswick's industrial and residential history.

Open Circulation



Figure 8a: A bluestone laneway provides immediate access to each home. Image: Tess Kelly.

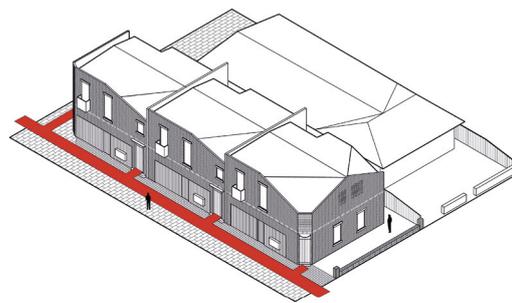


Figure 8b: Each home borrows from the bluestone laneway for open circulation access.

This strategy revisits the conditions discussed in relation to the preceding design strategy 'Borrowed Outdoors'. The laneway allows free circulation to each front door for pedestrians, cycles and cars (if used) (Figures 8a, 8b). In this way it protects the plot and the neighbourhood from the addition of impermeable driveways, which we know negatively impact eco-corridors, behaviours of rainwater run-off, and thermal heat gain (Newton et al. 2020:339; Ossola et al. 2020; Van Schaik and Bertram 2019:133).

Active Ground Plane



Figure 9a: Davison Collaborative opens directly onto the cobbled lane, allowing for informal everyday neighbourhood interaction. Image: Tess Kelly.

Figure 9b: Views to and from the street from Davison Collaborative. Note the low height of the front brick wall. Image: Tess Kelly.

This theme closely relates to the design strategy of Shared Outdoors. The deliberately low front wall/seat encourages neighbourly incidental interactions. People share and participate in day-to-day street activity which can range from a simple greeting to a conversation, to play with neighbouring children (Figures 9a, 9b.) Similarly, this theme is related to Borrowed Outdoors due to the incidental way in which residents arrive and depart from their homes, and the way their patterns of use are made visible at street level, animating the visual streetscape with daily variety.

4.2 Case Study Two: Nightingale Evergreen – 12 Duckett St, Brunswick

Shared Outdoors

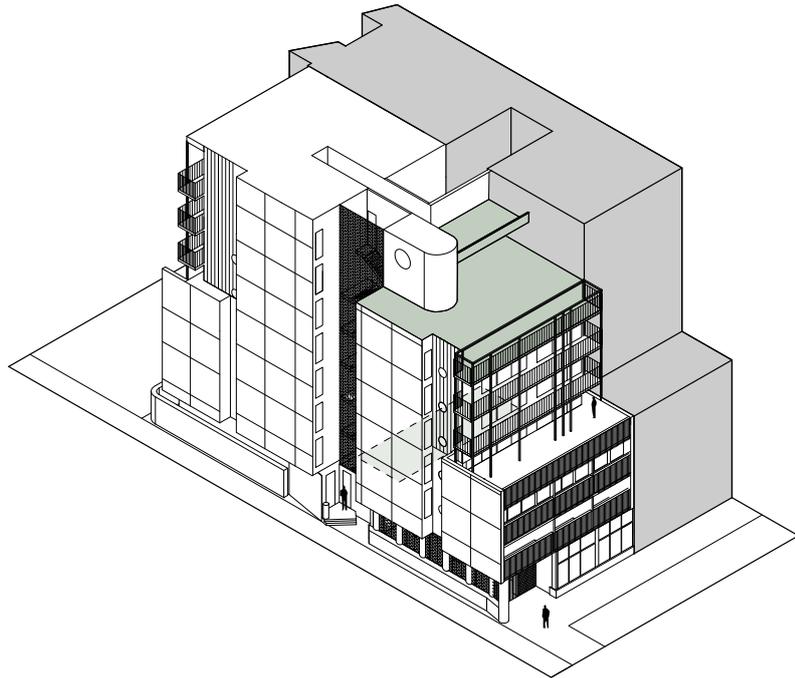
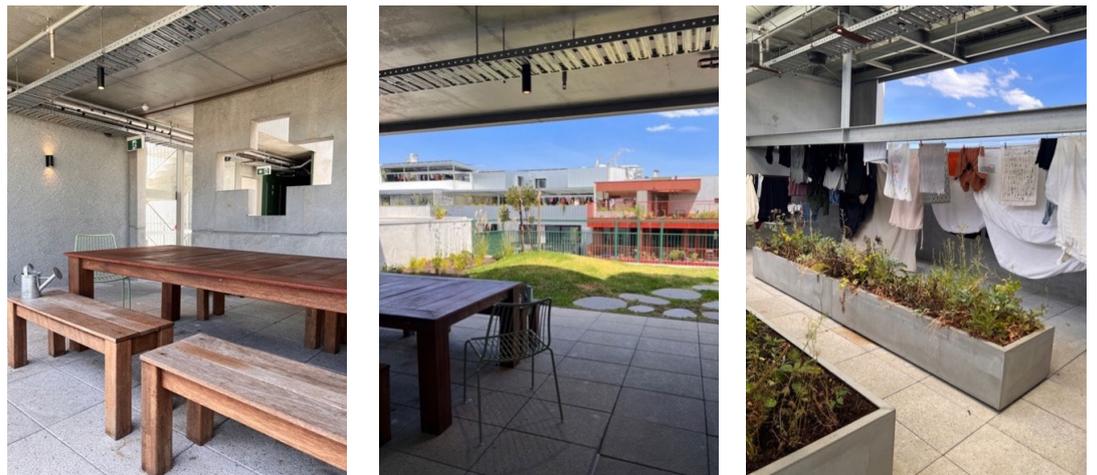


Figure 10: Diagrammatic representation of Nightingale Evergreen's shared outdoor areas shown in green and located on Levels 6 and 7.

In tune with the overarching premise of Nightingale Housing to promote housing equity, the 'best' parts of a building – usually the upper floors or roof level – are given over to shared outdoor spaces for all residents to enjoy (Figure 10). At Nightingale Evergreen (NGE), these include a garden and seating area with barbeque facilities on Level 6 adjacent to the shared laundry (Figures 11a, 11b), as well as productive communal gardens on Level 7 (Figure 11c).



Figures 11a, 11b: Shared amenities at Nightingale Evergreen include the roof terrace and garden.
Figure 11c: Shared laundry lines and productive gardens on Level 7.



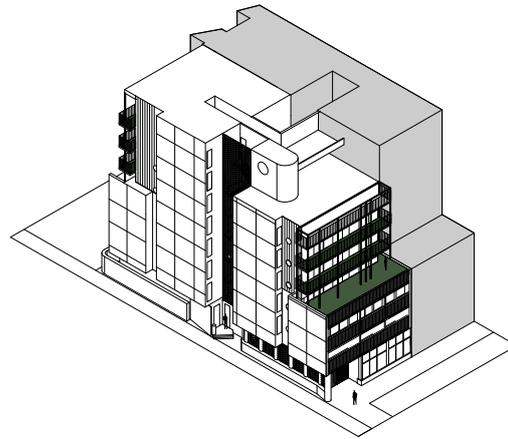
Figure 11d: View to Nightingale Village looking towards Duckett Street from Level 6 of Nightingale Evergreen.

The shared space overlooks the Nightingale Village (NGV) and Duckett Street – a newly redeveloped laneway from which all entrances to apartments in the village are accessed (Figure 11d). This lofty retreat brings light, as well as far-reaching views to the west, towards the city skyline and to the distant Dandenong Ranges (Figure 11e). Similarly, one floor above on Level 7, light and views are notable in the spaces set aside for communal productive gardens and laundry lines. Though data collection for this project is not yet final, reported usage of these areas is positive. One resident observed: “There’s a little vegetable garden that we have next to the clothesline, and we often run into people from our building there.”



Figure 11e: Eastern view from Level 6 communal garden towards the adjacent Nightingale ParkLife building.

Private Outdoors



Figures 12a, 12b: Stacked private balconies along the north and south facades (shown in dark green) introduce natural light and opportunity for passive ventilation to each home. They are all wide enough to be occupied by potted plants and outdoor furniture.

All twenty-seven apartments at Nightingale Evergreen have a private balcony, including the smallest c. 35sqm studio-like Teilhaus apartments. The generous balconies (between 6-8sqm) are located along the north and south facades. Their inclusion introduces natural light and air flow to apartments, and they are wide enough to accommodate outdoor furniture and spaces to grow plants (Figures 12a, 12b). The impact of having access to private outdoor space adjacent to an apartment is even more highly valued post-pandemic. Our collective lived experience of this extreme period has amplified the positive effects of a connection to outdoor space, including views out, and the introduction of natural light and passive air flow (Maturana et al. 2021; Molaei et al. 2022).



Figure 12c: Balconies have full height sliding doors, allowing external spaces to become an extension of interiors.

In mild weather, sliding doors of the apartments mean balconies effectively become an extension to dining-living spaces – places to entertain, relax or garden (Figure 12c). As with other case studies in this research, the inclusion of a usable balcony also means that they become active sites for residential activity – with the consequent public benefit of ‘eyes on the street’ (Goodyear 2013; Jacobs 1961). In other words, incidental views from residents over Bulleke-bek Park and the laneway of Duckett Street increase the sense of security for those at ground level because of the natural sense of propriety this ‘seeing’ introduces (Figure 12d).



Figure 12d: Nightingale Evergreen’s north façade from Bulleke-bek Park. Note the variation of how balconies are used by different residents and their views across the park.

Borrowed Outdoors

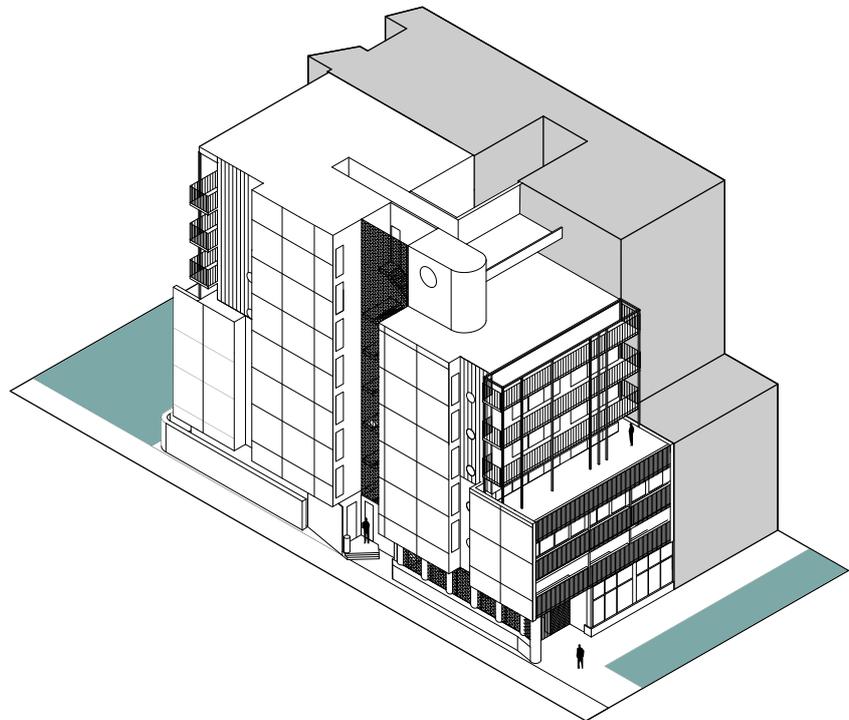


Figure 13a: Bulleke-bek Park and Duckett Street (shown in teal) offer ‘borrowed’ public places to rest, socialise, and play.



Figure 13b: Bulleke-bek Park provides a natural extension of the Nightingale Village.



Figure 13c: View to pedestrianised section of Duckett Street outside Nightingale Evergreen.

The adjacent Bulleke-bek Park created by Merri-bek City Council (Figure 13b) has become an extension to apartments in surrounding buildings, while Duckett Street is partially transformed into an urban pedestrianised lane (Figure 13c). The park in particular acts as a public backyard: it is where residents often socialise or enjoy time outdoors. Its proximity answers what one resident calls 'The Jumper Test'. In other words, whether home is close enough to warrant going home to change clothes or grab a jersey or drinks and return to meet friends. Whether the concentrated use of the park due to increased residents of the Village is sustainable or not is yet to be determined; it requires longer-term observation. However, the respect and joy anecdotally expressed by Nightingale Evergreen residents for Bulleke-bek Park suggests that this attitude will extend to their care for and responsible use of the park environment. One resident noted: "The park was a really big factor for us, too, in choosing this particular building ... even though I'm an urban person I have a strong need for connection to natural places. When [Merri-bek] took the decision to create this park, that took away any last reservations about [buying]."

Shared Amenity

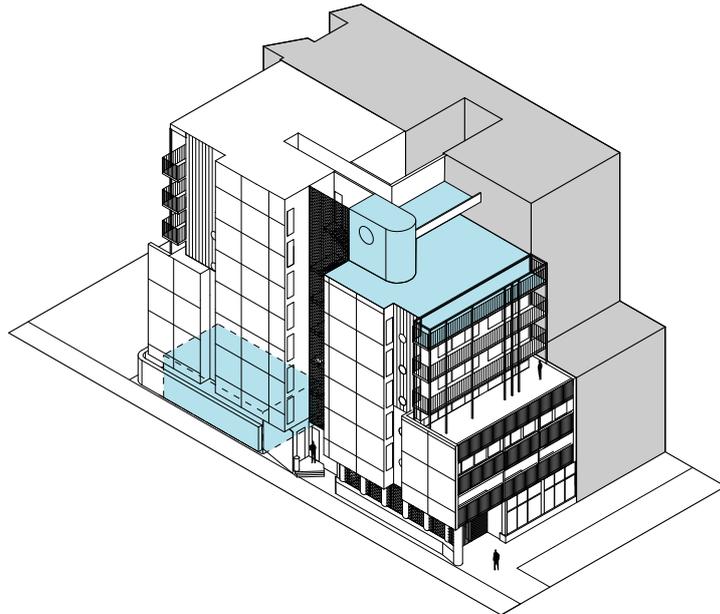


Figure 14a: Key shared amenities include the bicycle store at ground level and laundry facilities at Level 6 (shown in blue) as well as laundry lines and planters on Level 7. The space and costs they require would normally be absorbed by individual homeowners.

Another key aspect of the Nightingale approach is the pooling of resources to minimise cost and amplify sustainable responsible building performance and space inside apartments. As Nightingale Evergreen's architect, Clare Cousins, describes: "To deliver quality housing as cost effectively as possible there has to be consideration given to what we need to live simply and what amenities could be shared." (Hearn 2019). In this case, the project includes a shared laundry and communal terrace on Level 6 (Figures 14b, 14c), shared drying lines and productive gardens on Level 7 (Figure 14d), and bicycle storage at ground level (Figure 14e).

It is in these seemingly hum-drum places for daily chores that residents spend much time overlapping incidentally. One resident noted: "The area I use the most would be the laundry ... there are six or eight high quality machines, and I can go there and put on all our laundry for the week ... it's strangely the most social part of our building." This echoes another view: "Compared to our more 'glamorous' terrace, our utility terrace is used way more."



Figures 14b, 14c, 14d, 14e: View west from laundry; communal terrace; productive garden; communal bicycle racks.

Building Clusters

The volumetric arrangement of Nightingale Evergreen contrasts to a typical speculative apartment structure, in which the building envelope occupies as much of the plot as allowable, to maximise sales yield. Instead, at Nightingale Evergreen the building is split into two halves; one north-facing, the other south-facing, connected by an open stairwell that rises between the volumes along the western boundary and connects each level with open transfer decks. The open edges of north-south orientation mean the western building edge is used as something of a buffer against the acoustic intrusion of train noise from the adjacent Upfield Line.

The building steps back at Levels 6 and 7, which reduces the effect of over-shadowing and wind tunnels that are often associated impacts of tall apartment building clusters – and have a detrimental impact on pedestrians at ground level. The setback also responds to the Merri-bek Apartment and Design Guidelines, and subsequent Amendment C142 (Merri-bek 2017).

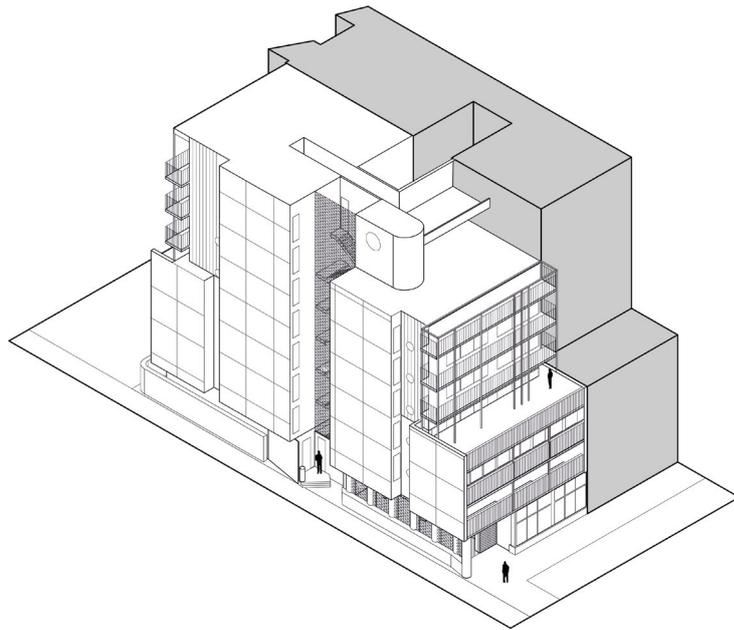


Figure 15a: Two volumes – north and south – form the main mass of Nightingale Evergreen's clustered building arrangement. Note the adjacent Nightingale ParkLife building (shown in grey) adopts a similar massing strategy.

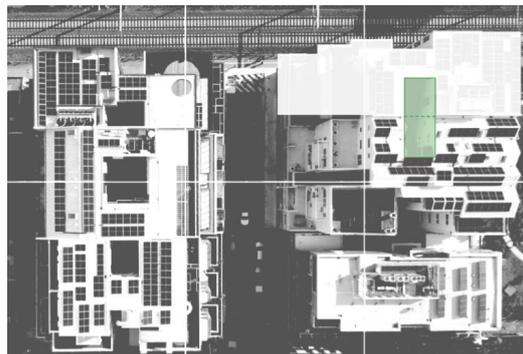


Figure 15b: Aerial view of Nightingale Village with the Evergreen (shown white), adjacent to Nightingale ParkLife. Their shared courtyard is shown in green.

Arranged as a north-south pair, the NGE volumes create a strategy that minimises the number of 'doors off cores' – or dwellings per floor. In turn, this encourages a sense of neighbourliness, rather than the anonymity often reported by residents of typical medium- and high-density apartment blocks, who access apartments from a lift core and internal corridors. The positive effect of limiting the number of neighbours per level gives residents a greater sense of control over how much privacy/interaction they choose to have with neighbours. This is an especially important quality for housing at density. As Lawson reminds us, "studies suggest very strongly that privacy is really about the ability to control the amount and type of contact we have with others" (Darke 1979; Lawson 2009).



Unusually, the Nightingale Evergreen building cluster is also arranged to share a courtyard with its neighbour, Nightingale ParkLife (Figures 15b, 15c). This shared treatment of the boundary doubles the size of the individual courtyards, in turn amplifying the amount of daylight entering all levels of both buildings. It is complemented by a shared landscaped courtyard at ground level, which informally links the two buildings. The gardens introduce seasonal change and offer a reprieve from what may otherwise have been a hard surface; easy to maintain but with limited charm and rainwater absorption capability.

Figure 15c: The shared courtyard between Nightingale Evergreen and Nightingale ParkLife offers twice as much daylight than would otherwise have been adopted, as well as a landscaped outlook.

Open Circulation

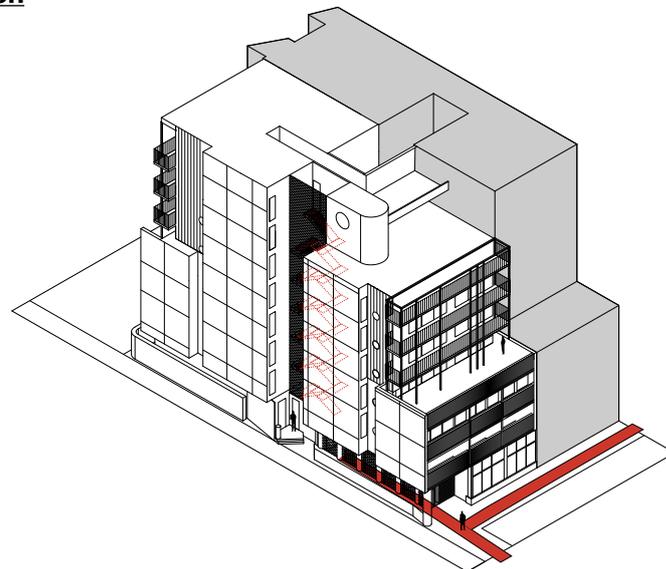


Figure 16a: From the Duckett Street entrance or the cycle parking, residents can choose to access their homes via an open stairwell; the open circulation paths are shown in red.

Closely related to the strategy of building clusters at Nightingale Evergreen is the open stairwell at the centre of the plan. Enclosed by wire mesh, which will gradually be covered with climbing vines, the open circulation introduces light, air movement and incidental interactions with other residents (Figure 16a). Overhead, transfer decks provide protection from inclement weather – a suspicion that is often raised against the use of open circulation systems.

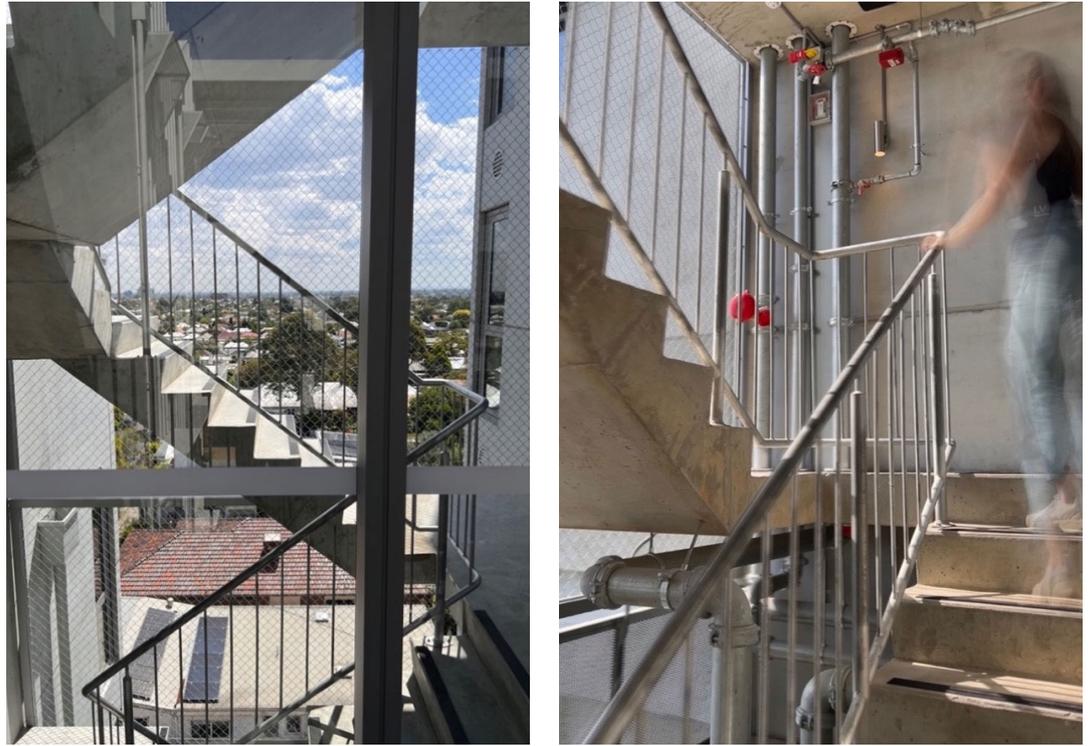


Figure 16b: View to the west from open stairwell.

Figure 16c: Flooded with daylight, the open stairwell encourages residents to walk upstairs, increasing opportunities for passive exercise on their way home.

The open system has added benefits of panoramic views and encouraging residents' passive exercise by climbing the stairs, rather than taking a lift to their home (Figures 16b, 16c). The site arrangement around open circulation also engenders a greater sense of community through informal measures, such as incidental views within the building of other residents, and unplanned meetings through everyday activities (Hertz 2021; Hugentobler et al. 2015; Marshall et al. 2019; Parkinson et al. 2019). As with residents at Balfe Park Lane (see p.34), areas outside homes have become an extension of individual dwellings – potted plants, door mats, shoes, and dog bowls all mark 'home' in individual ways (Figure 16d)

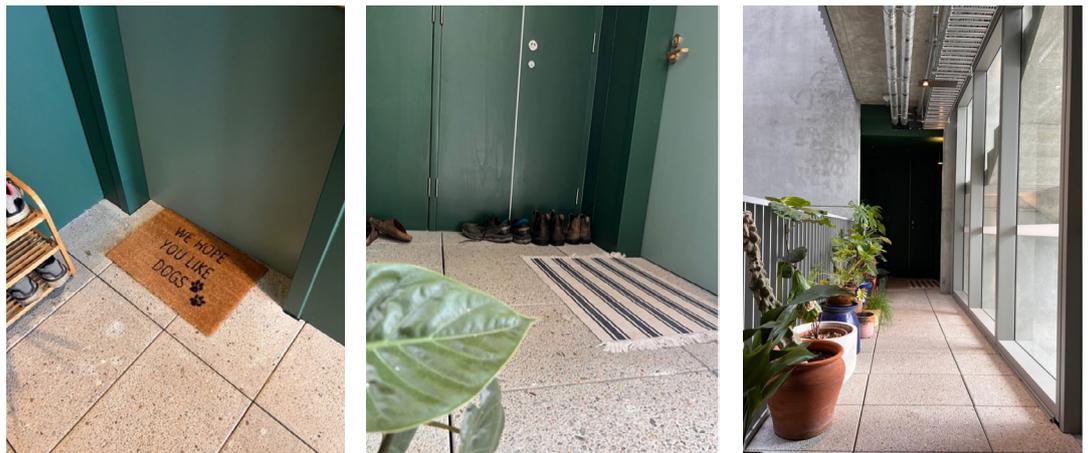


Figure 16d: Composite image showing personalised front doors and external walkways.

Active Ground Plane



Figure 17a: A visually open entrance to Nightingale Evergreen, with Good Cycles initiative adjacent. Image: Tom Ross

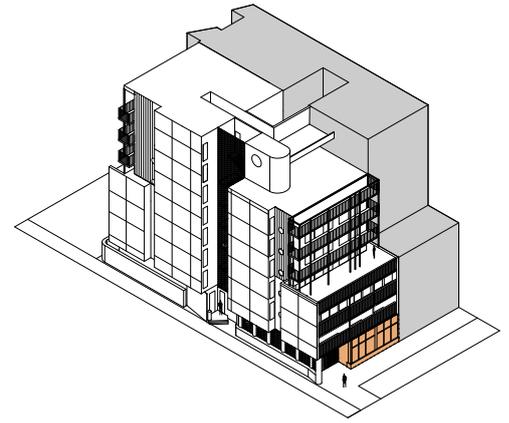


Figure 17b: Active ground plane introduced through the inclusion of a retail store facing Duckett Street (shown in orange).

The ground plane of NGE is marked by three entrances: the main gated entry with open grid; a bicycle repair shop, Good Cycles, facing Duckett Street (Figure 17a, 17b); as well as a cycle storage entrance ramp accessed directly from the Upfield Cycle Path. These entrances animate the street throughout the day, while Good Cycles provides a service that benefits all the community. The architect's choice of location and access for cycle storage was deliberate: this housing does not include car parking, and therefore the prominent role and ease of bicycle use was paramount.

Good Cycles is a socially sustainable enterprise carefully chosen by the unit trust (formed by individuals across the Nightingale Village projects) who own the commercial space and lease it at reduced rent. This collective governance aligns with the wider characteristic of collective housing where decision-making by consensus is encouraged. This is something typically harder to achieve in a larger project such as this.



Figure 17c: View from Duckett Street; Nightingale Evergreen is to the right rear of photo.

4.3 Case Study Three: Balfe Park Lane – 77-83 Nicholson Street, Brunswick East



Figure 18: View of western façade at Balfe Park Lane seen from the park.

Shared Outdoors

At Balfe Park Lane, the most notable shared outdoor space is the roof terrace with barbecue area, which is located on the valuable ‘best’ area of the site: the north-west corner overlooking the public park. Initially the roof terrace was poorly used, with residents describing it as “exposed,” “unfurnished,” and “somewhat ‘left-over’”.

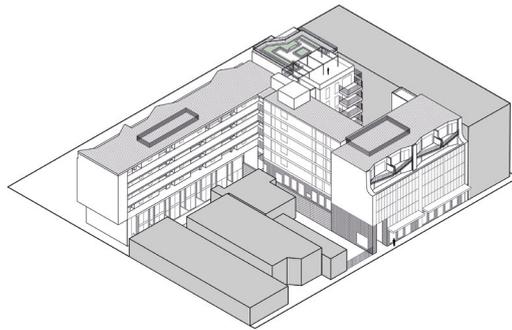


Figure 19a; As with other collective housing case studies, Balfe Park Lane’s ‘premium’ space is shared, providing a communal roof terrace and barbeque area.



Figure 19b: The Balfe Park Lane roof terrace enjoys 360-degree views, but its elevated position also means it is exposed to the elements.



“It’s nice to go up there. It’s a great view. It looks fantastic: it just needs furniture mostly. And then it also needs shade. Without those two things, it’s really just a bit of a look out.”

The usefulness of the Balfe Park Lane roof terrace, and how much or little residents could take ownership of it, was uncertain at the outset of the development. The elevated location offers magnificent views, but also means the location is exposed to weather and therefore tends towards seasonal use. In summer, the heat and sun means it is often too hot to spend time there, in winter it is too cold and wet. One resident observed:

“It’s just horrendous up there in winter ... now the weather’s been starting to get nicer, and we’ve just started [meeting up there] again, so I think it’ll probably happen more often now”

This suggests several points: the shoulder seasons will become the most popular times to use the terrace and – importantly – that measures to protect against heat, wind and rain will be needed to increase its year-round use. It is also early in the overall scheme for plant establishment, as well as for the communal formation of the project’s friend groups. Additionally, its lack of outdoor furniture further discouraged initial use. Now that this has been partly addressed by furnishings organised by the Owners Corporation, it will be interesting to observe if this alters patterns of use. A longitudinal study of the shared roof at Balfe Park Lane and other collective housing is needed to observe if patterns of use change over time. As one resident succinctly observed: “The amenity here is actually the generosity of space; not the rooftop.”

Because residents also have access to the generous outdoor spaces of their own balconies, some do not feel a need to travel up to use the shared rooftop space. This pattern of use (or under-use) bears out a broader observation from Balfe Park Lane’s architect, Kerstin Thompson. She noted that – even in the private houses her practice has designed – the idea of a roof terrace initially attracts excitement, but once built, the outdoor spaces immediately adjacent to living or bedroom areas tend to have the most use.³ This appears to be because they are easily accessible and within eyesight and are therefore more immediately used and maintained external areas.

In addition to the rooftop garden, a large area (c. 40sqm) at the centre of Balfe Park Lane is preserved as an open courtyard, which is accessible to residents only, and arranged over two levels: ground, and first floor (Figure 20). Set out in brick, the courtyards are planted with trees and foliage, with landscaping that is adaptable for use as seating, including brick benches 480mm high. Inclusion of the courtyard allows for generous separation between the west, south and east apartment blocks.

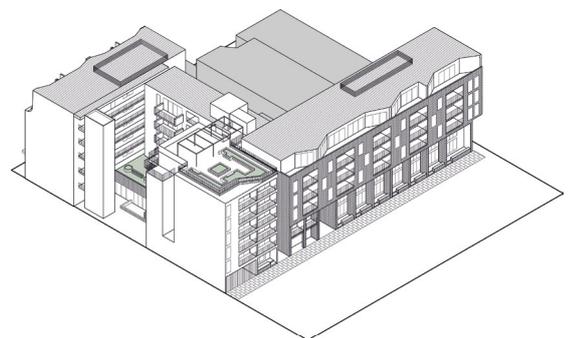
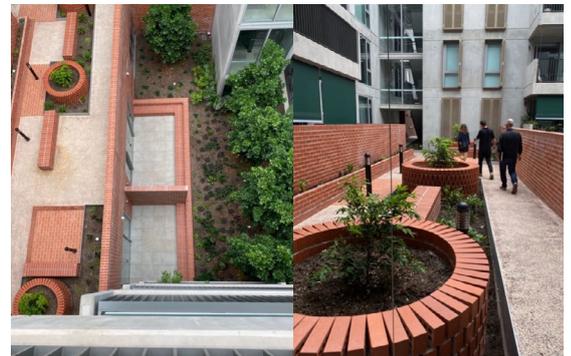


Figure 20: Aerial view and detail of the central courtyard and planters with built-in brick seating. The diagram illustrates the central location of the courtyard.

³Author in conversation with Kerstin Thompson, August 2021.

The intention was that the courtyard may create an informal internal garden space. In reality, comments and observations from residents suggest that this area is not fully optimised. One resident noted: “We have a courtyard in the middle that isn’t really used, but it provides a nice separation and some greenery.” Another observed: “There is a courtyard on level one, which is sort of like a mezzanine level ... and it is designed to be a space to sit and read or hang out. But I don’t think it’s used a lot for that. It’s more just a thoroughfare.”

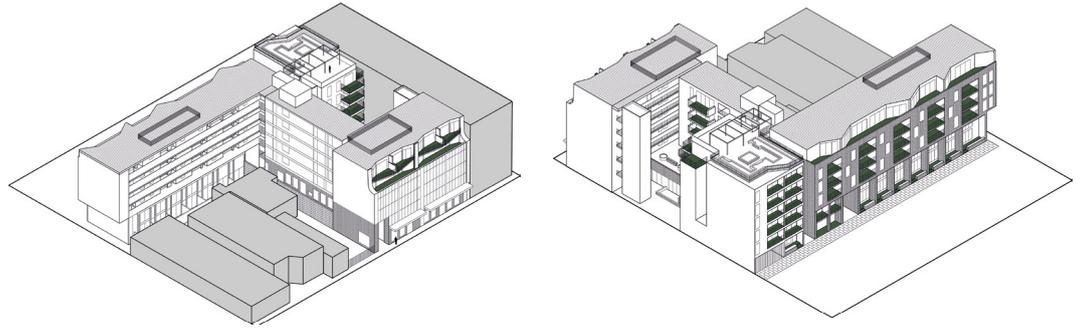
For now, the trees are relatively small – not yet broad enough to give shade or privacy under their canopies – so a resident sitting in the space would feel exposed to views from the three apartment clusters overlooking it. Also, the proximity to apartments adjacent the courtyard suggests an unspoken but felt incursion of privacy: “It doesn’t feel like a space that is separate enough from [housing],” said one resident, “It just feels like it’s a space to walk through, and that’s it. Which is a shame.” This speaks to the idea of privacy thresholds and degrees of engagement, which will be further discussed in the Open Circulation section below (p.33). While this part of the project may function differently than intended in the design strategy, it creates a positive effect through the circulation pathways it sets up: residents of the east and central blocks often pass through the courtyard to access Balfe Park. This engenders more chance meetings and incidental connections with others when walking to/from apartments.

Private Outdoors



Figure 21: East façade of Balfe Park Lane viewed from Nicholson Street showing screened balconies and open terraces. Image: Nelson Alexander website.

Each dwelling benefits from a balcony that ranges in size and responds to the scale of the apartment (Figure 21). Even the smallest apartments include a generous 6-8sqm of private outdoor space and all participants favourably noted the terrace and balconies. “I thought, ‘Wow! This is the one that has the biggest terrace; it’s got the eastern aspect, which is so much more usable than facing west’ ... We always wanted an open terrace [but] 19 square metres for terraces is unheard of.”



Figures 22a, 22b: Views north-west and south-east. Balfe Park Lane includes private terraces and balconies, so each apartment has its own generous private outdoor space.

Comparable to the positive effect of balconies at Nightingale Evergreen apartments, the generous size and immediate amenity that these balconies/terraces provide each home means that they are well used and colonised by residents (Figures 22a, 22b, 23a). Importantly, they provide a place for residents to emphasize their sense of ownership and homemaking in a secure, private outdoor setting.



“It’s the view from the balcony that I like the most, and the fact that we can get the cross breeze.”

“It’s nice to have like a fairly reasonably sized balcony. It’s a good-sized space out there. It’s feels quite sheltered and protected.”

The park-facing dwellings have the added benefit of views across the open green space (Figure 23a). Equally, park users benefit from the safety that can come with incidental views out from residents. An initial concern about heat-loading on the west-facing apartments has been remedied. Still, the solar gain – and the need for protections against it – were mentioned by residents on the upper floors. Block-out blinds and overhead retractable shading appears to mitigate the strongest heat effects and create light-filled and broad outdoor spaces that are

reportedly well used. As a resident shared: “I was worried about [the solar gain] before I moved in. I was thinking, ‘Oh, it’ll be really bad.’ But it’s actually not been bad at all. [The sun] comes in quite hard in the afternoon for a couple of hours. But now I’ve got blinds and I just pull them down ... and it’s really well insulated.”



Figure 23a: Balfe Park Lane balconies and terraces give residents a place for personal expression. Figure 23b: West-facing residents have views across the park.

Borrowed Outdoors

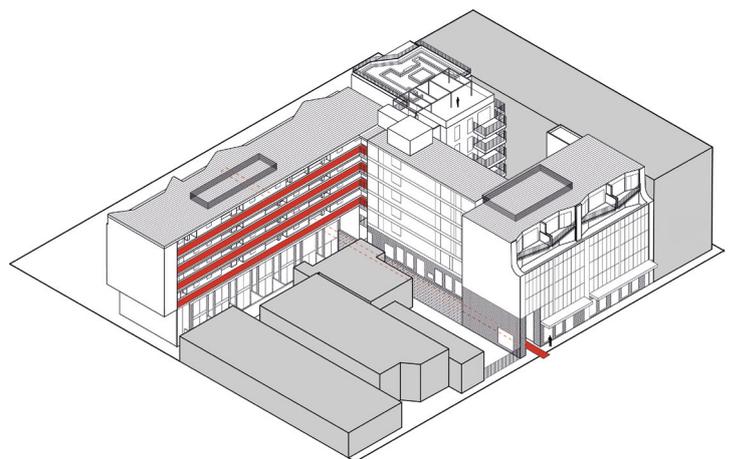


“ When I came here, I saw that the property would be facing the park; that was massive for me.”

Balfe Park is the key amenity and attraction that the development borrows from. Residents cited, almost unanimously⁴, that the location close to a large green open space was one of the most significant contributing factors of their decision to purchase a home at Balfe Park Lane. The park appealed for different reasons. One resident noted: “I grew up playing soccer, and still do; it’s got a soccer pitch – and it seemed perfect in that way.” Another said: “We were thinking about having a dog, but we hadn’t gotten [him] yet. So, when we saw the park, we thought: ‘How great that it’s just straight there!’” Whether it was to be near a place to exercise their dog, a proxy backyard for children to play in, or to simply enjoy living next to an unbuilt green area, resident responses were unequivocal: “The park is probably the obvious answer ... it was definitely the draw card.”

The value of living near open, green space is well documented, even if the park is unkempt, and particularly if it isn’t dominated by sports fields (Bamford 1992; Bolleter and Ramalho 2019; Homel and Burns 1985, 1989; Ossola 2020; Rose 2016; Taylor et al. 2015). Is it possible to encourage an increase in the ratio between nature and built fabric in favour of larger areas of landscape? Could councils actively reward developers to shift towards increasing green space through policy and planning controls? Ideally this would occur through precinct-scale coordinated planning.

An unusual aspect of Balfe Park Lane is the new lane it has created that cuts through the site, linking Nicholson Street to Balfe Park. This land, taken from the parcel purchased by the developer, has provided a beneficial short-cut that all neighbouring residents can use – particularly those travelling to and from Brunswick East – at all times of day.



Figures 24a, 24b: A new, publicly accessible lane creates a convenient east-west connection to the East Brunswick neighbourhood.

⁴In total, 86 per cent of residents explicitly championed the park location. A sole participant expressed doubt about the quality of the park, but was in support of its presence as an open built space. When speculating on future projects of medium-density in Brunswick they commented on a fear of too much density versus not enough green space.

As well as the convenience and urban connection this generates, the newly created lane also forms a boundary set-back for residents in the central block, increasing light and space for their dual-aspect outlooks. This is a surprisingly generous move for a market-led development: a for-profit, pre-sale, off-the-plan project comparable to existing speculative financial models. While the developer, Antipodean Land Developments, was required to introduce the lane to the site, their view was that not enough was being done by council to reward or encourage civic gestures, which often reduce yields. As with the discussion around increased provision for garden- or nature-oriented development, what are the most effective incentives to encourage this type of decision-making that will benefit both residents and the wider community in the immediate and longer-term?

Shared Amenity

The rooftop garden, the courtyard, and basement parking for bicycles and cars, as well as the communal room – the Hub – are the four key elements of shared amenity in Balfe Park Lane. Having discussed the patterns of use of the rooftop and courtyard above, the focus here is on the Hub, and on the car/bike parking provision.



Figure 25a: The communal 'Hub' building provides a multi-purpose room for all residents to access.

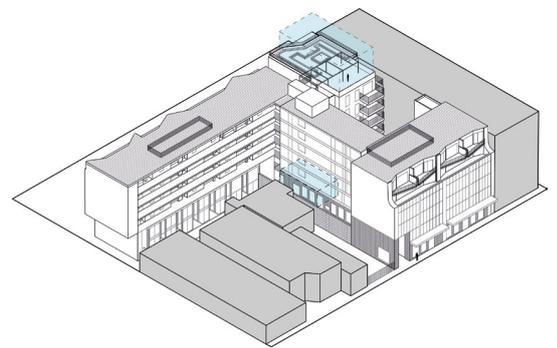


Figure 25b: Located at ground level, the new laneway provides easy access to the Hub for residents and their visitors.

The Hub communal room is a shared amenity with an inconclusive value. Designed as a multi-purpose room, with some input from residents about fixtures and finishes, it is located on the ground floor, adjacent to the new lane (Figures 25a, 25b). Residents observed it is occasionally used for after-school study, work-from-home hot desking, for hosting children's parties, or Owners Corporation meetings. The developer invited some input into what the unfinished shell might be. On this, one resident noted: "It was good to hear everyone's views [but] trying to settle on an agreed notion was pretty hard. Everyone has different views ... I think most people settled on this general idea that it would be a flexible space." In theory, the idea of having a space that could act as an extension to private homes is promising, however its multi-use character – and the absence of a defined purpose – meant that it was perceived as an underutilised asset. The unresolved status of this space, together with the wish for it to be useful, was consistently reported by residents.⁵

⁵The Hub was unanimously reported as being under-used, or not used at all by participating residents.

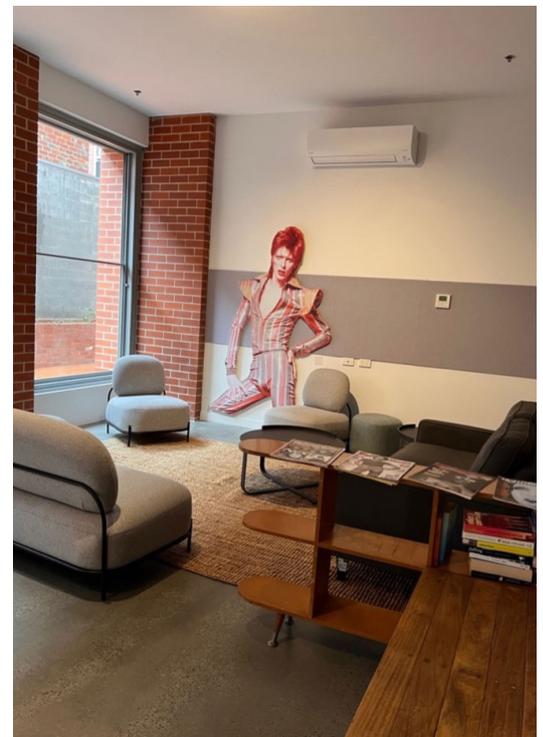


Figure 25c: Residents commented on the grey, cold atmosphere of the Hub, which deterred some people from using the space.

Part of the discontent seems to lie in the interior decoration and its impact on how the space is perceived (Figure 25c). The décor was regularly described as the antithesis to a soft, warm, cosy, and inviting place that residents would prefer to spend time: “The Hub ... is just us trying to figure out how to make it work and make it look warm as well, because it was a bit cold in there and not very cosy.” Another commented: “I’ve actually never used it ... it just is very grey.” Another participant recognised the difficulty to reach a united purpose: “We all have to agree on [decorating it] ... we don’t want to just get junk in there. So that’s the hard part: to agree on it.”

This difficulty aligns with observations at other collective housing case studies where a flexible communal room is included. A requirement for such rooms to meet the functions or needs of all residents means that, for some residents, the room fails to have any relevance. This problem of flexibility marries to a question of ownership: if a space isn’t owned or managed by a person or group, it becomes a sort of ‘no-man’s-land’. One honest observation at Balfe Park Lane captures this feeling: “The resident’s Hub is actually really underutilised. Everyone sort of had this collective agreement, but it’s just not doing what we thought it would do ... It’s one of those spaces that I think has very contested sort of ideas ... it’s not well used, to a lot of people’s frustration and disappointment. But I don’t know what the solution is.”

As well as the underlying speculative model of development, one of the main ways that Balfe Park Lane differs from other collective housing is by accommodating private car use. For many residents, having a car is not negotiable, whether because they have family, need to travel long distances regularly, or for other lifestyle reasons. It was interesting to observe the response of some participants who did not want to buy into a project like Nightingale Housing specifically because of its expectations of high community interaction and a car-free existence. For some residents, Balfe Park Lane struck a manageable balance between a perceived degree of community-building, with the Hub, gardens, sustainable objectives, and design quality being the main drivers of this. Provision for cars is seen as an asset of this project by residents. As one observes: “I think diversity of stock, diverse types of living is really fundamental ... this building, it’s bridging the gap where you’ve got all the modern day luxuries and comforts. But you have that sense of community, which is what elevates it from normal [apartments].” However, residents who cycled felt that the storage provided for bicycles was poor, and felt their needs were squeezed in around car users. The reported bias for the project was towards car travel, not cycle use.

Flexible Rooms

The Hub is the only flexible-use room in this project. As discussed above, its key difference in comparison to the flexible function of, say, the garage-turned-living room at Davison Collaborative is a sense of ownership, and its consequent relevance – or lack thereof – for a larger body of residents. This points to a wider observation regarding the scale of projects. A pattern across the data seems to suggest that when collective housing projects increase above approximately 30 dwellings, it becomes more difficult – perhaps even unworkable – for everyone to contribute equally and to have a say in how the project is used. This bears out in the reflections of Balfe Park Lane’s Hub at where a privately held vision conflicts with the demands of collective consensus: “I guess it’s hard to pick something that’s going to be suitable for most people. You know, some people might really want a gym, but a lot of people wouldn’t ... I was like, it could be cool to have a workshop here, but then not everyone would probably use that.”

In time, at Balfe Park Lane, the use of the Hub may improve or find a more defined program to be increasingly active. For now, it is not a space that is not widely understood or accessed.

Building Clusters

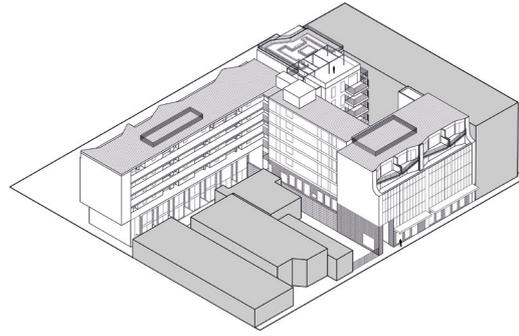


Figure 26a: A cluster of four smaller, seven-storey buildings break down the overall mass and create human-scaled apartment blocks.

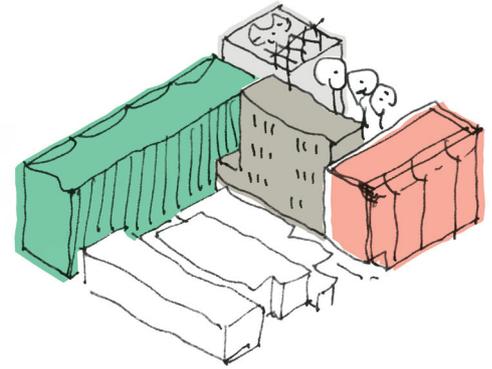


Figure 26b: Volumetric diagram of Balfe Park Lane by Kerstin Thompson Associates (KTA).

At Balfe Park Lane, the approach to volumetric organisation is a clustered strategy with the site organised into four apartment blocks. KTA's founder, Kerstin Thompson, has spoken about the deliberate intention to maximise the perimeter of a large building, which brings the benefits of passive ventilation, dual-aspect interiors, and breaking down a large volumetric mass into smaller forms. Another consequence of reducing the perceived overall bulk also creates places with greater individuality – a more identifiable 'home' for residents living in each smaller block, rather than the anonymity of one large mass. The scale of the clusters also means fewer neighbours per floor than a comparable speculative apartment block – each floor is accessed from a single-loaded open corridor, providing dual-aspect interiors to all apartments, and with it, passive heating and cooling (Figure 27). Whether conscious of these design strategies or not, its impacts were recognised by residents: "A lot of the ... amenities that came with the development we really liked. We really liked the cross-flow ventilation. The dual aspect views as well."



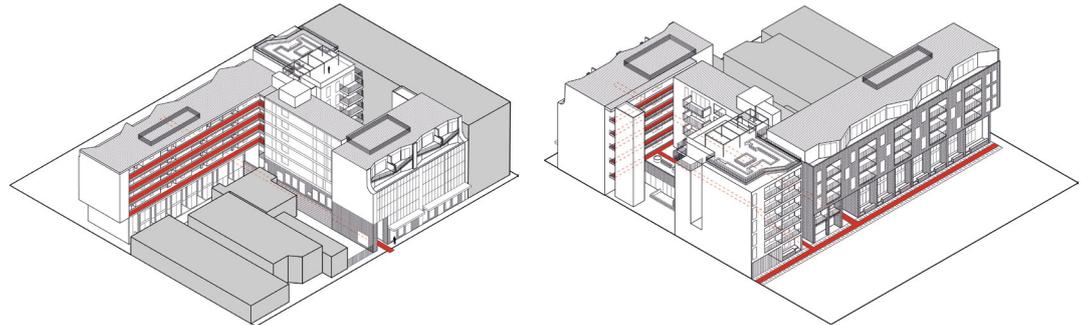
Figure 27: Natural daylight from the west, courtyard-facing windows brightens a kitchen.

“ In terms of the design aspects, it's very helpful. In summer, for example, I open that window and that door, and you get a beautiful breeze, which is nice. The insulation works incredibly well. So, I guess in that way, it's quite efficient. I rarely have to turn the heater on.”

“ The design of the apartment is really good; the cross-flow ventilation is generally pretty good. We don't have our air conditioning on in summer, except for the really hot days. [In] winter ... you could almost get away with not putting your heater on.”

The site plan of Balfe Park Lane is also unusually generous in its ratio of open unoccupied space compared to residential building mass. Residents consistently noted the impact of this, commenting on the airy, light-filled interiors of the project, and its high-performance sustainable aspects, such as uncommonly low utility bills, and minimal need for heating or cooling during much of the year for most residents. This was the case across differently sized apartments, and those with different solar orientation: “The energy [saving] in here is amazing. We hardly ever use the air conditioning. The fans are really good ... and in summer, when we first moved in, we didn't have blinds for a couple of weeks. We didn't have aircon in the master bedroom. And it was liveable.” Another resident noted the minimal running costs: “Utilities have been much lower considering I don't have any solar panels, so they're reasonably low, because everything's well insulated.”

Open Circulation



Figures 28a, 28b: Views north-west and south-east. Open walkways and stairwells within the complex act in two main ways to foster community connection: they provide incidental views across the project and of other residents; and they provide physical outdoor spaces for the small groups who share each level to interact.

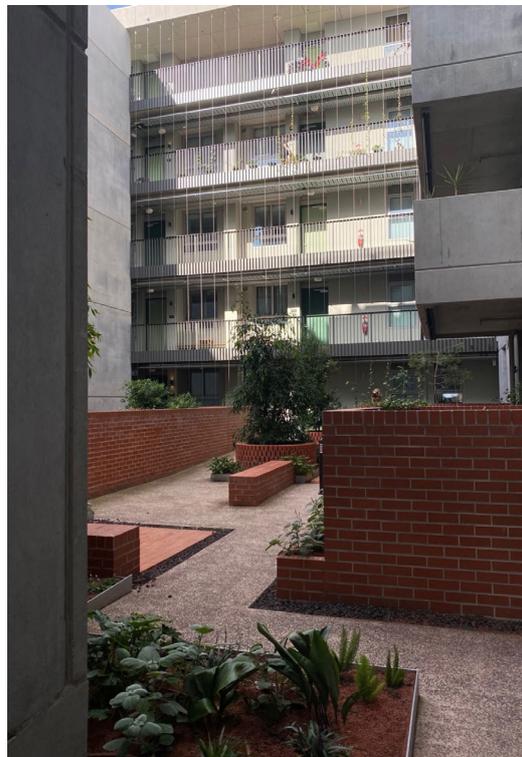


Figure 28c: View to open inner walkway of eastern apartment buildings with open courtyard in foreground.

As touched on above, Balfe Park Lane adopts a strategy for open circulation comparable to that seen at Nightingale Evergreen, albeit at a larger scale. Balfe Park Lane buildings are arranged in four clusters with single-loaded corridors: this means residents have a relatively small number of immediate neighbours, who share the broad, open walkways to access their homes (Figures 28a, 28b, 28c). The impact of this intimately scaled access was observed readily by participants.

“ The sense of community is all to do with the courtyard, open walkways, [and] little benches outside our kitchens facing into the walkways ... the design has fostered community ... even the scale: we've only got four [apartments] on this level. And we've already formed a dinner club. We have dinner with our neighbours every two months: that's unheard of in a normal apartment building.”

These open passages are broad in width (c. 1.7 to 2.5m) which means they can be – and have been – adopted as places to grow plants, to leave shoes, bikes, and other daily personal items, and to assemble furniture. They have become an extension of the home – a semi-public threshold for incidental meetings (Figures 29a, 29b). They serve as a useful overspill space in which children can play, as well as areas for pets to lounge in: “Everyone on this floor apart from us has a family of kids. So that’s kind of nice – they ride their bikes up and down ... and then the cat comes out and runs up and down.”



Figures 29a, 29b: Views of the inner-eastern walkways shared by only four to five other dwellings per level.

Similar to the circulation strategy at Nightingale Evergreen, usually only four to five residents share each common walkway (Figures 30a, 30b). This means that residents know their neighbours: “In the walkways along here, you see your neighbours quite a lot ... if you’re both out there, it’s a space to just have a quick chat.”



Figures 30a, 30b: Walkways are generous in width and visually open, allowing them to adapt to many different functions that spill over from individual home interiors. Note the broad built-in seating outside each dwelling.

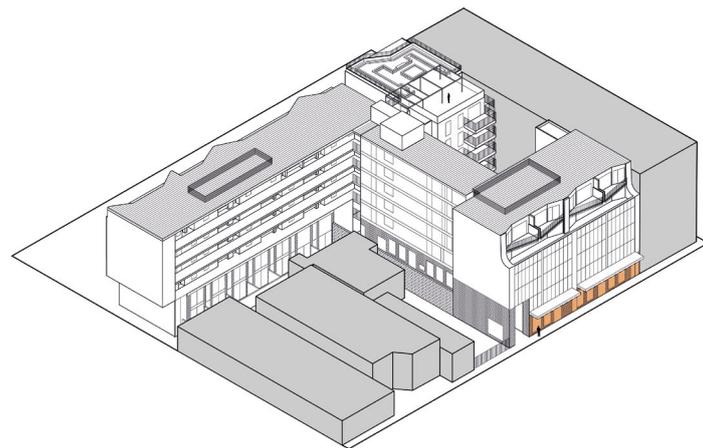
This informal neighbourliness may also lend itself to feeling less defensive about protecting against occasional access past private windows. Naturally, some residents are more sensitive to this than others; screens or blinds are sometimes used to protect against views in, and this was notably evident for residents closest to the lift cores, where lines of sight align with personal space. As a resident observed: “Before I put the blinds in, anyone coming or going could just see straight in, which is fine. But there’s an element of wanting to not feel like you’re in a zoo. So that isn’t ideal but by the same token it’s lovely having the window to be able to open ... In the end, I just put the blind in and it’s not too bad.”

An additional feature at Balfe Park Lane relating to the strategy of open circulation is the built-in timber seating ranging from 460mm to 600mm in depth. This is a convenient and human-scaled detail that encourages people to pause outside their front doors, to take shoes on or off, and creates a casual place to chat to fellow neighbours. The ability for residents to colonise these ‘extra’ threshold spaces appears to be useful in an apartment setting. It provides extra space for small footprint living and allows for everyday semi-public rituals that affirm a sense of ownership and homeliness for residents.⁶ As with the open circulation at Nightingale Evergreen – and other case studies observed in the wider doctoral research – it appears to increase a sense of security and rapport between neighbours.

Active Ground Plane



The project has three active ground plane edges: the residential townhouses along the west boundary (Figure 31a), the new brick lane to the south (Figure 31b), and the Nicholson Street tenancies along the eastern boundary (Figure 31c). The townhouses amplify passive views of what is happening in the park, and provide visual variety in the way that each townhouse resident decorates or inhabits their home – particularly their ground floor living spaces. The new brick lane is lightly activated by the presence of others using this thoroughfare, and by the occasional activities occurring inside the communal Hub.



Figures 31a, 31b, 31c: Clockwise from top left: Townhouses along western façade of Balfe Park Lane; permeable new lane linking east to west; retail units along Nicholson Street.

⁶One resident from the total cohort interviewed mentioned that they thought the use of this 800mm wide space was wasteful; they would have preferred it to be an expansion of the interior space, such as a desk for a work space. All other participants liked them, or didn’t comment either way about their inclusion.



Figure 32: Commercial tenancies at Nicholson Street have not yet attracted trade or retailers, breaking the line of activity along the street.

On Nicholson Street, the intention for retail/commercial tenancies to occupy the two spaces hasn't yet occurred (Figure 32). The trading spine of Nicholson Street is already active south of the site with local services such as dining, trade, cafes, bakeries; north of the site across Glenlyon Road is the East Brunswick Village (EBV). This precinct already offers much retail and commercial amenity and is regularly used by Balfe Park Lane residents. A change in strategy is needed to secure the empty tenancies at ground level to activate the project's eastern edge. Instead of vacant shops, it would be worth considering the value of short-term leases, for example, to young enterprises, pop-up shops, or not-for-profit companies who may otherwise struggle with the cost of renting a new site like this.

4.4 Lived Experience: Overview of the Three Case Studies

While full data analysis is not yet complete for some case studies, the resident interview responses share repeating themes. Many dovetail with the impact of design strategies that have been adopted, some question how these strategies are implemented or programmed, and others speak to a wider enquiry into the impacts – and potential impacts – that collective housing may hold.

Design Value

A theme that consistently threaded through residents' reasons for purchasing or living in the selected case studies was the value of the design. All the projects are designed by exemplary, award-winning architectural practices – Clare Cousins, Archier, Kerstin Thompson (KTA) – with their skills evidenced through peer recognition across the industry. The way this translated into confidence to buy into the projects was clear – particularly in the context of widespread dissent about Melbourne apartment standards during the 2000s, which led to the Better Apartment Design Standard guidelines (BADS). Participants explicitly mentioned the value of a good designer: “When you’ve lived in apartments for a long time, you sort of know the difference between a really well-designed apartment; we picked that up pretty quickly. A well-known architect was a big draw card, especially at the time – a couple years ago – when off-the-plan developments had really a bit of a bad name and quite a lot of bad media about the dangers of it.”

Similarly, the perceived notion that the project would be worth the price – offering value for money – correlated to the involvement of a respected architect/designer: “At the time, it was just [shown as] 3D models, but I liked how it was designed, and the architect in particular, Kerstin Thompson, was someone that seems to think very deeply about design and civic ideas. [I thought] an apartment complex she’d put together would be pretty good. And the more I looked into it, the more that seemed to be true.”

Quality

The quality of the design and construction closely aligns with perceived value, and design value. Even for those who were not involved in the design or construction industries,⁷ the quality of fixtures and finishings, the good acoustic separation, abundant daylight, space planning, and the high standards of build were noted by residents. The evidence is in the resident narrative: “Everything I looked at, compared to this just wasn’t really up to standard. This was really the best option for the cost,” noted one resident. “We knew that what was drawn would be built,” stated another. Quality was perceived as a key reason these projects stood apart from speculative counterparts of comparable size and location. Overall, buyers had chosen a place they felt was the best they could buy: somewhere that was well-built, in a location that they liked and for a price they could afford.⁸

Upholding quality and density – and communicating this to a wider public audience – is serious work that is needed to achieve a substantial shift in many negative perceptions about housing at density. An ambitious public program holds the potential to build confidence in density, and to offset the average Melburnian’s experience of impractical living choices. Consistent data findings indicate the ongoing impact this is having on urban sprawl dominating arable land on the metropolitan fringes (Infrastructure Victoria 2023).

Community

Another theme that is closely connected to the concept of collective housing – and associated ideas of sharing resources and steady, egalitarian decision-making processes – is community. Community is tied to the notion of social capital as understood in the Putnamian sense. This type of social capital features the creation of safe, just, and stable democracies – or, as Putnam describes, “trust, norms, and civic networks” (Putnam 2015; Putnam et al. 1994). How you create a community from scratch? How does it behave as a collective? How enduring are its connections? These are key concerns on the part of collective housing values.

⁷A noticeable proportion of residents were trained in design/architecture/development, or had extended family or friends who had, and who were able to share their professionally informed advice.

⁸Note that this does not mean these could be considered ‘affordable’ housing, based on the accepted benchmark of housing costs versus ratio to average earnings. See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/591796/house-price-to-income-ratio-australia/>

It is useful to note that strong social capital (sometimes termed 'social trust' or 'full trust') is usually a symmetrical transaction. In this sense, social trust is achieved when you trust another person in a community or social network, and they (equally) trust you. This reciprocal exchange is based on similar values, which lead to 'equal cooperation and socially compatible goals' (Hyypä 2010).

This idea of friendship and reciprocity are a core part of the collective housing case studies discussed in this report. Residents noted that being part of a community was one of the main (sometimes unexpected) benefits and joys about living in their homes. One participant commented: "We'd lived in apartments before but ... there's something special about everyone in the building, and in the neighbourhood, opt[ing] in to being a bit more connected with their neighbours and wanting to live in a sustainable [way] ... having people around you that share your values." Other community relations had been established more organically and hold a connection to design strategies. At Balfe Park Lane, for instance, the small number of immediate neighbours off open pathways has lent itself to neighbourliness – the dinner club mentioned previously, for example, which manifested in a natural way. Though design or architecture cannot be fully credited with creating or denying community, the careful decisions taken to encourage it do affect shared interactions.

At the same time, the process of community-making for all case studies occurred through a combination of physical interactions that the buildings themselves engendered and digital tools such as Facebook or WhatsApp. Even when it may appear that common spaces were not entirely successful, such as the Hub at Balfe Park Lane, one resident sagely noted that if no provision for places to meet collectively were given, then meeting up with 'strangers' in a new housing development definitely wouldn't happen – or at least, much less often. It would also more likely occur as isolated friendships between individuals rather than a group of people meeting together within the building.

Community Formation

The leadership and vision of the developer also impacts upon the community formation within a building. In these case studies, an attitude towards community-making on the part of the developers ranged across the spectrum: from a mostly hands-off approach, consistent with typical off-the-plan purchase models for speculative housing, to compulsory participation in a not-for-profit model such as Nightingale Housing. For example, Nightingale requires purchasers' buy-in and consistent engagement with its concept for accessible, sustainable homes for all.⁹ Its balloting process automatically appeals to, and enrolls, those with shared values: people who wish to uphold the overarching Nightingale remit. It is interesting to observe how a more organic form of community-making can also evolve, without active programming, social engagement, and information sessions, such as at Balfe Park Lane.

Scale

The physical scale of a project and the number of residents within a community is related to the cohesion – or lack thereof. The preferred size of a building, and group size of people living within it, was a prevalent topic in residents' interviews. One interviewee pointed out: "We're in the smallest building ... and that's also one of the reasons we really wanted to be in [it] because we love that it's at a small community scale ... and we know everyone so well." At the larger scale of Balfe Park Lane, the clusters serve to create four integrated buildings, each at a scale of about 20–30 dwellings. This has measurable impact: "You can do big projects, but you have to break them down ... that's what this one does pretty well. Breaking it down to almost four small buildings, so you don't feel like you're in a big block." Answers on the 'ideal' size of housing block varied. "I think, probably no more than like 15 or 20 [people] per floor," was one response while "no more than about 30 [dwellings]" was another.

Scale and proximity also have a related impact on privacy as we discussed previously. Again, this is shored up by resident observations: "I think that's one of those things that sounds great in theory, but in reality ... if [the walkway] feels too exposed, it's just kind of weird ... it's only our neighbours [walking past] – it's not like the street or anything. So generally, it's fine. I'll usually have the blind up during the day."

⁹For example, buyers agree to attend several briefing sessions, are encouraged to engage with social and educational events about their prospective homes while also accepting that no car parking is provided in the buildings.

Ownership

Living more closely with others usually means having less space to ‘colonise’ as one’s own. The degree to which residents feel like they have a ‘proper home’ not ‘just an apartment’ links to the ease or difficulty with which they can have a sense of ownership. Scale, and the physical formation of buildings, has a role in this: recall the open circulation with exterior spaces for residents to occupy, private outdoors (balcony/terrace) to inhabit and relax, and building clusters that break larger blocks into more personal sized ‘neighbourhoods’.

It is generally easier to achieve a sense of ownership for individuals living in housing at smaller scales – the pot plant left outside the front door, the seating adapted for use as a workbench, the storage of children’s buggies, for instance. Where building and group sizes become larger, the need for greater standardisation – and often property management controls – comes to the fore.

Sustainable Performance

A primary response offered in the RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick’s Living Together survey asking why people might want to live in collective housing was ‘sustainability’¹⁰. This bears out in objectives stated by the case study developers, and in reasons given by participating residents. Responsible sustainable performance is a significant motivating factor for buyers to adopt collective housing. All the case study projects have efficient Nationwide House Energy Rating Scheme (NatHERS) energy ratings. As a standard, this includes double-glazing, cross-ventilation (achieved through the building form), and gas-free connections in favour of a green power provider. Being able to live with little to no utility bills for heating and cooling – largely due to these passive measures – was regarded favourably across all case study residents.

Residents preferred to take active control in decisions around recycling, and some had ambitions – realised, and unrealised – for composting green waste. As is clearly stated in all its communications, the Nightingale developments have a remit for car-free lifestyles – though not all residents surveyed across the case study projects supported this.

In addition to the immediate, individual savings, some residents also recognised that by living at greater density, they were rejecting the traditional desire for standalone housing, and the comparably land-hungry appetite that this typology requires. Several residents specifically mentioned their view on urban density and the unsustainable character of urban sprawl, a position shored up by quantitative evidence:

“ I think [density] is a good solution for a lot of people ... I think it would be nice to see a bit of creativity in those sorts of things. And responsible use of space, so not having rows and rows and rows of [blocks], but giving it a break, so that you’ve got airflow and a bit of view and all the rest of it. But I think [density] is gonna be important for people who need to live closer to the city for things like public transport, and bike commuting, and all the rest of it. It is going to be important because sprawl is not terribly ideal.”

Shared Amenity / Shared Outdoors

Sharing is a key metric of collective housing. Yet there is a noticeable difference between necessary and nice roles of shared spaces. Anecdotally, it appears that where shared resources include useful, everyday tools, such as a laundry or clothes lines, these are the most active places for residents to use. In these spaces, the shared function is defined, and it offers necessary utility for residents; their frequent use also offers regular opportunity for social overlap.

¹⁰The response to RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick’s Living Together survey conducted between 2022-23 showed 64 per cent favoured sustainability; followed by affordable and fair housing; social connection and collaboration; and shared facilities, in this order of interest.

This contrasts to some instances of shared amenities, such as outdoor roof terraces or communal rooms, that are 'nice to have' additional facilities, yet that may have a poorly defined scope. We can see this at Balfe Park Lane (certainly to begin with) where the lack of seating and shading, the exposure to inclement weather, and the fledgling gardens meant that its purpose – and therefore its collective use – was not understood or enjoyed. This suggests further research is needed to investigate the key qualities of shared spaces that are activated – particularly if they don't serve an everyday need/function. What are the vital ingredients for shared spaces to reach their full potential? Would it be more effective to convert them to another use, or to increase the residential quantity or green space offered instead? Perhaps they should become a dedicated resource: a workshop, a hot-desk space, a kids' play area – shared at a precinct level, not just for the building?

Green Areas

Across all the projects, having access to open, green space was a primary instigator for residents to choose their home, no matter the scale: Davison Collaborative's shared front garden, Bullekebek Park outside Nightingale Evergreen, and Balfe Park at Balfe Park Lane. The luxury of having immediate proximity to a usable green space in an inner- and middle-ring city location cannot be underestimated. "There aren't a lot of parks around [Brunswick] so you want to utilise them," noted one participant. Residents' enthusiasm for and decision to buy into homes like these, with easy outdoor access, was a strong driver. "Just walking from the park up to your place or just looking out onto the park ... it's really lovely." A Balfe Park Lane resident noted: "We use it all the time."

Location

Unlike many other assets, in an economic sense, real estate – the 'asset class' of housing – has the distinct characteristic of being inseparable from location. The importance of being in a place where things are happening, where public transport is reliable, where friends or family can easily be connected with, near green spaces, and where many daily activities are in walking distance was regularly cited in the survey data. Even small changes of location can register strong impact: One resident deliberately wanted to live near a specific tram route, for its efficiency and reliability, noting: "Actually, the 96 tram was a big factor ... as a tram line, it's really, really good. To get to work, it can take 15 to 20 minutes max, whereas [at Lygon St] it used to take me 40 minutes." Similarly, at Nightingale Evergreen and the Davison Collaborative, the Upfield Cycle Path and Upfield train line were cited positively by different participants. The proximity of both projects to the active transport corridors encourages the use of public and private car-free transport. This loops back to the increasing concern – and value – being placed on sustainable living practices.

Location is also intimately tied to earnings, education, and efficient use of resources: we know that job and wage growth are stronger in globally connected 24-hour, walkable, liveable cities and offer the environmental advantage of efficient use of resources (Rose, 2016). The valuable location of an urban or middle-urban site, built at density, gives the opportunity to share these urban advantages more widely (to those who are willing to try it). At a granular level, the types of assets nearby – transport, parks, public services, retail – will continue to shape housing desirability.

It is important to re-state that this investigation into collective housing remains in progress; a full analysis across all data sets is needed to verify initial hunches and findings. The research continues to ask what impact an attitude to shared resources may have on resulting housing forms, and social norms, and what lessons we might learn from case study exemplars to find constructive guidelines for living at greater density in the city's middle-ring suburbs.

Further refinements will be made when the data collection and analysis is complete. In doing so, the research will assist in understanding if and how the economy of shared resources – that is, land, social capital, and amenities – plays a role in Melbourne's innovative medium-density middle-ring housing.

Early findings from the RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick's Living Together Research Project point to a range of opportunities that this housing type may provide, which invite further analysis. These include Social Wellbeing, Design Value, Policy Incentives, longitudinal tests on the formation of strong and stable communities, and ecological impacts, as well as quantifiable economic benefits. The points set out below are reminders of potential benefits, without forgetting the wider challenge of Australia's housing context. They gesture to research discoveries from Living Together and speculate on where and how we may further progress the research.

Value Social Wellbeing

An integral part of the project method pays attention to resident responses. The value of this participatory research provides a means to understand how a project works through the eyes of those living there. This raises the enormous yet overlooked potential of an emerging metric of Social Value: an instrument that seeks to capture “wellbeing generated through the procurement of buildings and places” (Samuel 2020). Social Value encompasses measurable outcomes – for example, accounting for the annual cost per person of loneliness to local, state and federal bodies – and subtle markers, such as improved biodiversity through resident regenerating of park and nature strips near their homes. Typically, such markers sit outside the main focus of traditional post-occupancy evaluations, though LEED and WELL do include social sustainability criteria.

For contemporary housing, four main areas are identified as frameworks to assess social value: Positive Emotion created through connection to nature and active lifestyle opportunities; Connection to people and the natural environment; Freedom and Flexibility, allowing for diverse lifestyle choices; Community Participation may also feature in developing a project (RIBA 2020). The RIBA Social Value Toolkit for Architects is one example that sets out a clear methodology to capture social wellbeing. Perhaps more importantly, it assists in quantifying economic benefit to investors by illustrating Social Return on Investment (SROI). Without capturing these “intangible but significant impacts,” (Samuel 2023) the community-based, collaborative and shared character of Social Value will be overlooked in Melbourne's future housing and, more widely, in shaping our city.

Activate Shared Amenity

How communal areas operate is critical to the success behind the idea of sharing resources. Careful consideration needs to be given to issues such as how spaces are planted or programmed. Many examples of communal spaces in collective housing seem to suffer – at least initially – due to the overly flexible character of these spaces. Being required to be ‘all things, to all people’ they become less useful to everyone. Active programming, and delegated management – for example, by establishing a gardening committee or a dedicated social or leisure program for communal rooms – seem to be ways that may shift this pattern of use.

In effect, if everyone in a medium- or large-scale collective is expected to be responsible for shared space, usually no-one feels able to truly take responsibility for it. The difficulty of encouraging a sense of ownership is more evident as the scale of projects increases. This results in neglected spaces that don't perform to their potential – which is an irony when living in a small-footprint means space is at a premium, and also paired with the sustainable performance objectives of this typology.

Design as a Value

Across resident interviews we find consistent citations stating that they chose to buy into their apartment because they knew that a talented and trusted architect/developer was involved in the project. This illustrates the qualitative value of design. It is an (ongoing) task to communicate the value of design. In part it may be about increasing widespread public education about the advantages of well-designed homes – from the qualitative to the quantitative – a beautiful sunny outlook, neighbourliness, stable thermal efficiency, utility bills at a fraction of their usual cost and so on. At the same time, undertaking financial analysis, most likely through a Hedonic research method, is required to test the relationship between perceived value and sale cost. In other words, how can design value be illustrated economically, as well as socially or emotionally? And how can those values be best communicated to investors, developers, residents, councillors, who are, largely, investing into what is built?

Consider Design Value in Policy Frameworks

If planning controls would consider a favourable rating towards exemplary projects – those demonstrating excellence in areas such as design, responsible environmental performance, community benefit – would this encourage developers to raise the bar and invest in the medium- and long-term quality of the built environment? The City of Sydney's Competitive Design Policy (CDP) to pursue design-led planning initiatives is a national precedent for this (Freestone et al. 2019). Two readily identified incentives for investor confidence include defined planning processes and yield uplift.

Commission Longitudinal Neighbourhood Impacts

The research points to several questions that require longitudinal analysis to determine:

- Does collective housing create established communities that are stable and long-term in formation?
- Does collective housing also assist in creating stable, engaged neighbourhoods?
- Does collective housing contribute public cost savings in terms of the 'value' of alleviating social risks, such as loneliness, for residents and their local communities? This should consider collective housing aims to create sociable, neighbourly communities, where people know and look out for one another.
- Could more be done to present the possibility of collective housing as a viable option for elderly Australians who wish to downsize and age in place, but who often misunderstand the concept or are fearful of what it may require?

Commission Longitudinal Ecology Impacts

When collective housing adopts greater priority for planted green spaces, what are the impacts of eco-corridors at the larger scale of a neighbourhood, or suburb? In the context of a loss of natural habitat in Australian cities, would collective housing strategies that favour increased areas of planting versus built fabric help to offset this loss? Or does more need to be done to have a tangible impact? A longitudinal study comparing baseline and post-occupancy impacts on ecological change would be necessary to answer these questions.

6. Afterword

The outcome of **Living Together** strengthens our understanding of the impact that sharing resources has on the lived experience and social norms of residents, and how it interacts with the design elements of collective housing forms. What emerges from the case studies contributes to solutions for living together better at greater density in Merri-bek, and beyond to Melbourne's middle-ring suburbs.

RMIT PlaceLab proves what's possible when local community knowledge and expertise informs world-class research. Together, we're tackling real-world, urban challenges and seeking innovations that improve liveability, community resilience and connection, evolving spaces into places.

Delivering benefit for local government and partners by making research inclusive, practical and hyper-local to achieve real impact.

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Ethics

This research project has been assessed and approved by the RMIT University College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN). Ethics Reference Number: 25586.

Research involving human participants is consistent with the guidelines contained in the Australian National statement on ethical conduct in human research and Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

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Conflicts of Interest

There are no declared conflicts of interest associated with this research project.

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We hope this report sparks more important conversations.

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