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How well-designed affordable housing improves lives

For too long, affordable housing has been lacking in good design, with many low-income individuals and families still living in inadequate housing conditions.

Sydney architecture and design practice, [TURNER](#), is working closely with agencies like the NSW Land and Housing Corporation, City West Housing, and Aware Real Estate to help change this.

They say the first step is to simply design apartments that they themselves would be happy to live in.

TURNER's fundamentals of good affordable housing design are showcased in the practice's recent Blackwattle Apartments, Boronia Apartments and Bigge Street projects. The designers say successful affordable housing should seamlessly weave into the broader community, provide ample opportunity for personalisation within apartments and spend money where it counts.

TURNER Director Dan Szwaj says that design shapes the quality of life for affordable housing residents.

"Well-designed homes can improve safety and create a sense of community, while poorly designed affordable housing has the opposite effect," he says.

Dan says one of the key design drivers of TURNER's affordable housing projects is the idea of 'blind tenure'.

"Blind tenure means affordable housing should look no different to other housing. It should be equal to, or even better than, regular market housing," he says.

"We want these residents to love where they live. They're already at a disadvantage. We don't want their homes to look like what you would traditionally expect from affordable housing, or have any stigma attached to them because that impacts the surrounding community's attitudes towards residents. 'Stitching' the building and residents into the broader community is really important."

Blackwattle Apartments, developed by City West Housing, delivers dedicated affordable housing as part of the Glebe Affordable Housing Project Cowper Street redevelopment that replaced a number of dilapidated social housing flats with a mix of social, affordable and market apartments.

Following the success of Blackwattle Apartments, TURNER is again working with City West Housing to deliver its new Boronia Apartments project in Waterloo, set to begin construction in mid 2023. The development will provide housing for those in need, with around a third of all apartments dedicated to women and their children escaping domestic and family violence.

City West Housing Head of Development Lisa Sorrentino says the provider is directly responding to the growing demand for housing.

"We have seen an extraordinary amount of people's situations change with Covid," she says. "We are seeing some trends for single occupant households increasing, so demand for our one-bedrooms is the most severe. We do also see a lot of families that require housing, particularly single mums."

Dan says designing affordable housing is a delicate balance between providing high amenity for residents and being conscious of budgetary constraints.

"The last thing we want is for someone to miss out on the opportunity for housing. If we were to embellish housing projects by spending money where it wasn't needed, that would mean less funding for future projects, which could result in someone missing out on a home," he says.

Dan suggests it's important to invest in small features that make a real difference in the way people live and help to create a sense of home. This includes providing ample storage, and simple things like hooks, alcoves and bookcases for personal belongings. He says it's also important to embed design initiatives like maximising the number of naturally ventilated apartments through to solar panels, that go directly to reducing residents' power bills and living costs.

TURNER's approach to affordable housing design is the culmination of 10+ years of learnings in the sector. As early as 2009, the team began working on its Telopea Social Housing project, which was recognised in 2013 with a design award by the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) NSW, a rare accolade for projects of this nature. The practice's Washington Park project was also commended by the AIA in 2014, for its progressive design which combined affordable and market housing. TURNER's more recent social housing project, Bigge Street, is also shortlisted for a 2023 AIA NSW Award.

TURNER Director Stephen Cox says the Bigge Street project's recognition by the design industry is an indication that the project is designed to the same high standards as private apartments.

"The award nomination demonstrates that the quality of the design is comparable to other shortlisted projects. It was important to us not lower expectations or aspirations of what an apartment building should be, simply because it's social housing," Stephen says.

"A criticism I have of lots of social housing is that it looks unusual or strange – like it doesn't fit in. That's not what we wanted to achieve for Bigge Street – instead the project works with the urban context and is an exemplar of what is possible in a suburban setting while still working with the specific requirements of social housing."

Dan and Stephen both agree that affordable housing is a vital part of Sydney's housing mix.

"Our communities and cities thrive on diversity," Dan says. "Affordable housing celebrates the very best parts of that diversity and embeds it into our city. We're lucky that the City of Sydney is quite forward-thinking when it comes to delivering well-designed affordable housing and we look forward to helping many other people into homes they love in coming years."

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