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Affordable Housing Matters, and the time to do more is now!

A diverse range of experts at the Robin Boyd Foundation's recent **Affordable Housing Matters Forum** presented a consistent message:

Housing is a basic human right.

Community and government policies and actions must move from treating housing primarily as a means of wealth creation.

The fundamental priority is about reinforcing housing, not simply as an investment and an alternative scheme to build wealth, but a way in which we value the raising of children, the quality of households and of everyday life.

- Michael Lennon, National Housing Supply and Affordability Council / Regional Housing and Planning, University of South Australia

Unfortunately (or fortunately) there is nothing new about this. In 1941, as a 22 year old student, Robin Boyd wrote that:

'private enterprise has proved totally inadequate... There is one way, and only one way, in which housing can be replaced on its feet. The answer is in Canberra, Canberra is the power to set the machinery in motion.'

In 1947, Boyd became founding director of the Small Home Service, the pioneering and immensely successful service offered by the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects and *The Age* newspaper to address the post-war housing shortage, offering low fees and low build costs for modern, environment attuned, affordable houses, supported by weekly newspaper articles educating on finance, design, construction, quality, materials, low cost and self-build housing.

(Boyd) understood that it's about how we live together. It's about identity, about how we see ourselves as individuals, as families, and as a nation. He knew that in order to change the city we need new plans, but most of all, we need new dreams.

- Associate Professor Rory Hyde, School of Design, University of Melbourne

After decades of relating to housing in market economic terms, the speakers agreed that market based policy will not deliver the necessary supply of affordable housing, and certainly not to the quality and community outcomes that we deserve; and that we require political will and bravery, support from community, the private sector and all levels of government.

... if two thirds of people are invested in the housing market already, and like the idea of the price going up, it takes a lot of political bravery to say, I'm going to push it down.

- Richard Denniss, Australian Institute

It's called a crisis. Therefore, urgent but considered responses are required. Get it right... for the future. Policy reform, evidence-based strategic planning and direct public investment dominated forum discussion, which also focused on experimental ideas and approaches to delivering scalable, high quality, well designed, and appropriate housing models to those who need them most.

The answer is in collaborative development models. There's a lot of government funding, good intention, talk about ESD, and impact funding by institutional investors, we need this. There is a symbiotic relationship between government subsidised and private sectors. Wealth is going in one direction as a

means of extracting capital, but so too are health, wellbeing, education, and employment outcomes.
- Nemesia Kennett, *Nightingale Housing*

Despite the seemingly enormous challenges in the area, we are buoyed by the forum's consistent solution, innovative design thinking, cross-sector partnerships, evidence based research and precedents that cut through the current political rhetoric and complexity of the issue. The overall tone of the forum was overwhelmingly optimistic. We can do things now and they will last beyond the next electoral cycle.

I've seen inspiring examples of international cities genuinely addressing the need for affordable housing. Cities like Vienna, London and Barcelona are doing it much better than we are in Australia. They have clear housing strategies which coordinate efforts and therefore are most effective in the face of crisis. Strategic tools help us to address the affordable housing crisis by critically engaging with this complex problem, analysing it, informing decision-making, and planning for the future.
- Jennifer Kulas, *Affordable Housing Matters Forum*, guest curator

The Robin Boyd Foundation takes from the **Affordable Housing Matters Forum** clear and direct actions that will have meaningful impact:

- Cancel the stage 3 tax cuts and fund initiatives to improve housing affordability.
- Get rid of capital gains tax concessions and negative gearing.
- Streamline logical planning pathways that benefit the occupant and the community.
- Implement mandatory inclusionary zoning to enshrine a component of affordable housing in all new developments.
- Retain public ownership of public land including ground lease models rather than selling to private consortiums for development.
- Explore alternatives to the blanket demolition of all 44 public housing towers. We call for further clarity, expert consultation, tower-block-specific research and smarter thinking on how to use this culturally and economically valuable land and housing. Any redevelopment should include a greater increase of public or social housing beyond the 10% increase currently proposed.
- Greater government and institutional support for newer and internationally-proven housing models, in the community housing sector, such as limited equity schemes, community land trusts, and cooperative housing models.
- Genuinely listening to tenants, providing greater occupant agency, spontaneity, flexibility and adaptability of social housing.
- Clear and non-negotiable standards around quality, sustainable, and good design.
- Direct investment in First Nations organisations and effective community consultation to create self-determined and culturally appropriate outcomes.
- Embrace First Nations peoples' approach to caring for Country and collective stewardship of the land provides valuable learnings and the potential to reconfigure our attitude to 'property'.

The Robin Boyd Foundation welcomes the debate sparked by the Commonwealth's development of a 'National Housing and Homelessness Plan', as well as the release of the Victorian government's 'Housing Statement', both ten-year-plus strategic plans to address housing affordability. The Foundation supports strengthening the middle and inner suburbs that have established infrastructure. However, the targets to increase social and affordable homes are not bold enough. They will not maintain the percentage of affordable homes as a ratio of overall housing stock. Both plans lack actions to increase rates of home ownership or bring down the cost of housing. Supply alone will not solve this crisis.
- Tony Isaacson, *Chair, Robin Boyd Foundation*

Affordable Housing Matters Forum

Attended by architects, developers, students, investors, housing providers and interested community members, the **Affordable Housing Matters Forum** took place on Friday 6 October 2023 at Kensington Town Hall. Presented by the **Robin Boyd Foundation** with guest curator **Jennifer Kulas** the forum aimed to inspire new solutions and advocate for a coordinated effort across disciplines to address the current housing crisis.

As inaugural Director of the *Small Homes Service*, **Robin Boyd** worked to democratise design by offering low-cost, high-quality architectural documentation for housing, which you could purchase for a modest £5. The initiative was an unprecedented collaboration, bringing together the unlikely partners of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects (RVIA), Myer department store and *The Age*.

While many of the contributing circumstances may have evolved from the post-war era, Australia continues to wrestle with the issue of housing affordability. Today, we find ourselves in a particular housing crisis, with some commentators believing it the worst in a generation. Just as the **Small Homes Service** emerged at a time of great need, innovative design thinking and cross-sectoral partnerships are required to address the structural factors causing declining affordability.

Speakers:

Prof Nigel Bertram, [N M B W Architecture](#) / [Monash University](#)
Nick Bourns, [NH Architecture](#)
Richard Denniss, [Australian Institute](#) (ACT)
Associate Prof Rory Hyde, [University of Melbourne](#)
Nemesia Kennett [Nightingale Housing](#)
Jennifer Kulas, [Housing Choices](#) Australia
Jeanette Large, [Women's Property Initiatives](#)
Prof Michael Lennon, [National Housing Supply and Affordability Council](#) / [Regional Housing and Planning, University of South Australia](#) (SA)
Rob McGauran, [MGS Architects](#)
Jeremy McLeod, [Breathe Architecture](#)
Jake Milgrom-Marabel, [Tripple](#)
Genevieve Zoe Murray, [Future Method Studio](#) (NSW)
Rebecca Roke, [RMIT University](#)
Dr Jonathan Spear, [Infrastructure Victoria](#)
Katherine Sundermann, [MGS Architects](#) / [Monash University](#) / [Urban Design Forum](#)
Dr Ryan Van Den Nouwelant, [City Futures, UNSW Sydney](#) (NSW)

Organisers:

Robin Boyd Foundation:

Established in 2005, the Robin Boyd Foundation is the custodian of the legacy of Robin Boyd and the iconic Walsh Street residence that he designed, built, and he and his family inhabited. The Foundation is renowned for its innovative design-focused public learning programs and events that activate and increase community awareness, dialogue, understanding and participation in Australian architecture and design.

Jennifer Kulas:

Currently a development manager at Housing Choices Australia with a background in architecture, Jennifer is endlessly intrigued by the place where design meets development finance and the capacity of housing to create social equity. Previously, Jennifer was the principal policy advisor - affordable housing at City of Melbourne and development manager at Nightingale Housing. In 2020, Jennifer was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to investigate innovative housing models for women and women-headed households internationally.

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