

LIVING BY DESIGN

KATE ROBERTSON

Winning concept lights the way for public housing

Residents are saving on utility costs and enjoying the ambience of the Living Spaces development.

Long-time public housing tenant Bernadette Keenan cried tears of joy when she saw her new home in Dandenong. Ms Keenan was transferred to one of 15 dwellings at an innovative public housing complex that has taken out a Melbourne Design Award for its environmental and social credentials.

The model for the public housing site, which has been built over six consolidated blocks, was chosen from a range of submissions to an open design competition run by the Office of Housing and the Office of the Victorian Government Architect.

Bent Architecture won the competition and co-director Paul Porjazoski says his aim was to create a medium-density housing model that would "rejuvenate the site in an environmentally and socially responsible way".

'One young guy ... used to be in a nursing home but now gets to live independently.' Paul Porjazoski

The result is Living Places, a stunning complex of chalet-style houses that deliver an energy rating of more than eight stars. The design emphasises northerly orientation and includes solar hot water systems, solar panels for electricity generation, and water tanks under the slabs. It also has bike racks, communal social spaces and private productive gardens that encourage interaction between residents.

"The main challenge was not knowing who you were designing for," Porjazoski says. When designers work for developers they have a target market, and when working for an individual their brief is clear. However, public housing caters to a diverse demographic.

"Our primary response to that challenge was to basically create

homes that were light-filled because, in addition to the environmental benefits of having every room north-facing, I think that's one of the fundamentals that transcends cultures," he says.

In keeping with the need for flexibility, the houses have features that enable residents to be as private or social as they wish, with wooden slat screens that can be retracted to expose the windows to the common areas, and fences cut in two enabling the top half to swing open to invite over-the-fence conversation.

"They are tall fences but we didn't want residents to feel like they're fenced off," Porjazoski says. "They open up if you want so there's a much greater feeling of openness. It's giving them a little bit of control so they are able to mediate their relationship with the community."

The houses range between one and four bedrooms and residents include singles, families with adult or young children, and people with a disability.

"All the units have a fully accessible bedroom and bathroom on the ground floor," Porjazoski says. "There's one young guy living here who used to be in a nursing home but he now gets to live independently."

Ms Keenan says moving into the one-bedroom unit at Living Spaces in 2012 made a massive difference to her life. "No one wants to be in [public] housing, to be in that position," she says. "You have this stigma and you feel bad enough ... so for me it is great to have something lovely like this to live in."

Ms Keenan says the communal outdoor areas with barbecues, plants and seating are well used. "I often sit out there with a coffee and have a chat with other residents. It brings people together."

"People smell what's cooking and they come out of their units and have



Flexible: Allowing for both privacy and sociability, the 15 chalet-style dwellings (above) also feature soaring ceilings in living areas (below left), while the overall design emphasises northerly orientation (below right).



a look and a chat. People here look out for each other."

Ms Keenan has also noted a major fall in her utility costs as a result of the environmentally friendly design.

Her one-bedroom unit has a 3000-litre water tank, solar hot water and a one-kilowatt solar power system to generate electricity. The unit has been built with an outer layer of Colorbond over brick veneer, which serves as a temperature-regulating thermal mass. The soaring

ceilings give the living areas a sense of space, while the double-glazed windows make it soundproof and add to the temperature comfort.

"I have definitely saved on my bills," she says.

Porjazoski says he is hopeful private developers will be interested in using his award-winning, environmentally friendly design for the private housing market.

Not only does the flexible design enable more homes to be sited on a

block, but research has shown people who buy into developments that have communal facilities are more likely to use them, Porjazoski says.

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