

gold standards

True collaboration and a shared vision helped to reimagine social and affordable housing in this local community. Laura Valic reports.

A vacant lot left alone for decades while thriving communities closed around it is now home to more than 100 residents in an impressive social and affordable housing development located in the heart of Shellharbour, NSW.

The Central Gardens complex, owned and managed by local community housing provider the Housing Trust, is a true urban infill site, consisting of 71 apartments and villas. The development, which is now housing a number of residents previously at risk of homelessness, was made possible by timely government funding and the combined efforts of developer Nick Murdoch of Murdoch Projects, and various project partners.



HIA member Andrew Manson, managing director of Barrington Homes in Wollongong, played a significant part in the build, after signing on to construct the 15-villa component of the complex. He was pleased to have been informally approached to respond to an expression of interest, based on his reputation.

‘Nick came to me on recommendation from others, who had said “Andrew runs a good business, go talk to him”,’ Andrew reveals. ‘A lot of our customer base is from referrals, it’s how we like to get business. We [try to] build a good, credible brand that operates from sound ethical principles.’

Andrew, an architect and builder, says the project differed from his usual business contracts which mostly comprise new home builds for the everyday ‘mums and dads’. However, he says he is keen to be part of more collaborative building in the future. ‘I can see the merits in collaborating, and hopefully in the end, we ensure a good social outcome as well as a good commercial outcome,’ he says.

According to Nick Murdoch, the building process between a private sector developer, building partner and community housing provider was almost ‘unwritten’. But in this case, the right people, a flexible approach and a shared vision made all the difference to a successful build.

This sentiment was echoed by Joan Ferguson, CEO of the Housing Trust. ‘Murdoch Projects and Barrington Homes understood very clearly the needs that we were trying to meet and they were quite flexible and helpful,’ Joan says. ‘We’ve worked closely together to achieve a product, which in my view, is one of the best and more affordable housing projects built under the National Rental Affordability Scheme.’

The complex took 18 months to build and was officially opened at a ceremony in June 2016.

Nick believes Barrington Homes’ focus on design helped cement the success of the project, and the relationship between builder and developer. ‘We both have a shared philosophy...if housing is to be built – whether it is social, commercial or high-end – it should be well planned,’ he says.

Visually, the Central Gardens complex is quite impressive, with crisp, clean lines





Left: Andrew Manson, managing director of Barrington Homes.

juxtaposed against dark accents. An occasional splash of colour upon the façades serves to break up any uniformity, while communal gardens add a touch of country. Wide timber and concrete pathways flow between the units, providing convenient thoroughfares for the tenants, many of whom are aged over 65 or live with a disability, and rely on electric scooters to get out and about.

Nick and Andrew laboured together over the designs to get them 'just right'. But even with the most carefully laid plans, circumstances or new needs arise.

'Often the client will come back and say they've thought about new ideas since starting the design and construction process,' Andrew says. 'Where you can, you should allow flexibility along the way.'

The build was relatively advanced when the Housing Trust sought a way to accommodate the tenants' use of electric scooters. They knew riding them up and down elevators could unbalance the lifts, and people usually only did so in order to charge them. The solution? Retrofit existing storage cages to turn them into parking and charging stations. 'It wasn't part of the original design but we made it work,' Nick says.

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When it comes to building, planning and design, Joan says car parking gets the focus, with little to no thought given to this mode of transportation used by many ageing residents. 'We came to this problem quite late but we knew the builder would make it work,' she says. 'It was their acceptance of our customer's needs that made this partnership genuinely worthwhile for us.'

In terms of location, the site is 'excellent'; flat and accessible for the people who live there. It's also close to the city centre, transport and amenities. However, from a building perspective, the site was a definite challenge – a good reason for why it was left undeveloped for so long.

'It was a battle-axe-block but it didn't really have a true battle-axe handle,' Nick explains. 'It had a one-metre handle but I had to negotiate a land swap with my neighbours. It then had some serious infrastructure issues.'

A trunk sewer line runs underground while a substation next door has extensive in-ground cabling feeding it. These site constraints had to be dealt with as part of the design; some of which Nick says he knew about already, some of which he didn't.

And while many project issues can be minimised with good planning and design, there's one thing a builder can never control: the weather.

'It was the wettest April on record as I remember,' Andrew laughs. 'The rainfall was relentless and came down at the wrong time...for an apartment builder, you've literally got to build a hole and that's the last thing you want. [In the end] it was like a swimming pool!'



Despite these challenges the development was completed to a high standard, with its overall functionality achieving the Gold Standard for Livable Housing Design – not something you usually associate with social housing – but an ‘absolute requirement’ for the Housing Trust. These design guidelines help to ensure new homes are built with versatility and accessibility in mind to better meet the changing needs of occupants over their lifetime.

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Overall, each unit is future-proofed with about 22 bathrooms modified to particular tenants’ needs. Floor penetrations near the toilets have been placed so a disability pan can be fitted,

and walls have been strengthened to accommodate retrofitting, such as installing grab rails.

‘The adaptability of these future-proofing spaces is important but it also adds a cost to the project,’ Andrew says. ‘A bathroom will end up much larger as an overall percentage of the floor area, so if you’re trying to develop affordable apartments, but also future-proof them, there are challenges. [But] I think that’s where design really comes into its own.’

According to Joan, the feedback from residents has been overwhelmingly positive. ‘Not only is Central Gardens a place to call home, but it’s also a community,’ she says.

‘This was a great learning exercise for Murdoch Projects, Barrington Homes and the Housing Trust. You realise that quite a lot is possible, and if you open your mind and work together in a problem solving way, you can do more than you might initially think.’

Code red

The Central Gardens social and affordable housing complex in Shellharbour, NSW came with its share of hurdles, not the least because of the various standards it needed to comply with.

Barrington Homes’ managing director Andrew Manson says there are a number of codes that sit over the top of each other which can cause confusion.

‘You’ve got a lot of codes to consider,’ he says. ‘I found the level of compliance amazing and challenging on this project. You comply with one, but another may mean you have to change something to comply with that.’

‘There’s a bit of work that needs to be done to simplify and unify all the various codes that govern this sector of development.’

Andrew sits on the HIA Illawarra committee where these types of building issues experienced at the local level are brought from the committee to the association to advocate for industry change.

‘Our role as housing developers is to challenge government because we are at the pointy end of delivery, we’re not the policy makers,’ he says. ‘And a lot of what gets in the way is policy, regulations and red tape, and the cost of that compliance.’

Andrew says in general town planning is often disjointed between governments and the private sector, and more collaboration is needed. ‘We’ve got a lot we can bring to the table,’ he adds.

With lessons learnt, relationships forged and the trio all a little wiser, they have turned to a new project. A larger unit development located about 20km north of Central Gardens on land owned by the Trust is currently awaiting council approval.

The plans consist of both social housing and privately-owned residences to help foster mixed communities. And a development *Housing* will no doubt be watching with interest. **H**