

P A R I T Y

Responding to Homelessness in Tasmania Putting the Pieces Together



NOVEMBER 2011
Print Post approved PP32866/0060
ISSN 1032-5170
000 20 005-475 007

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VOLUME 24 • ISSUE 10

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Contributions to *Parity* are welcome. Each issue of *Parity* has a central focus or theme. However, prospective contributors should not feel restricted by this as *Parity* seeks to discuss the whole range of issues connected with homelessness and the provision of housing and services to people who are homeless. If possible, the length of contributions should be no greater than 1000 words. Please consult the *Parity* editor if this is insufficient. Where necessary, contributions will be edited. Where possible this will be done in consultation with the contributor.

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2012 Parity

Publications Schedule

NB: Please note that this may be subject to change.

March:	An Introduction to Homelessness in Australia
April:	Philanthropic, Corporate and Private Sector Responses to Homelessness
May:	Policing Homelessness

The views and opinions expressed in *Parity* are not necessarily those of CHP.

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Strata Title Legislation and the Implications for Homelessness

By Erika Altmann,
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A compact city is a great idea for numerous reasons. However, there are drawbacks to the way we currently build that will lead to a spike in rental prices and increase in homelessness in years to come. In Hobart increasing inner city density is one of the likely directions in Hobart City Council's proposed Inner City Action Plan. Think of Darryl Kerrigan in the iconic Australian film, *The Castle*. "You can't do that" he says. "That's my home" he says on learning that an airport wants to demolish his residence. It was a David and Goliath battle, one that won our hearts. I am about to tell you a similar David and Goliath story about demolition and highlight how this may affect a 'renter's' ability to find adequate accommodation, creating downward pressure at all levels of accommodation seekers, leading to increased numbers of homeless in coming years.

The urbanisation of our cities is not only a physical phenomenon. It is also a reality that we each live with as we search for accommodation. We are constantly bombarded with messages of how good the densification of our cities is for us in terms of environmental and community outcomes, and work-life balance. Yet our city buildings age with time, as does the services infrastructure. It is on this process that I want you to focus. What happens to our multi owned buildings as they age and what will happen to the people who live in them as the buildings reach the end of their 'economic life' and are demolished?

The creation of multi owned, strata titled housing occurs as a legal mechanism at the time local and state governments accept and approve the developer's survey plans. The developer uses the strata title mechanism to facilitate the on-sale of individual units or apartments. The 'owner corporation' or 'body corporate' as the community of owners is known comes into

operation when the property has been on-sold by the developer and is there to maintain the communal building infrastructure and assets. Fifteen per cent of Australians now live in apartment complexes (ABS 2006). In Victoria, one in four people already lives within a strata titled complex (OCV 2011). In 2010, 91 per cent of new strata dwellings in Victoria were sold to investors, not home owners (OCV 2011). Figures are not available for other states.

Local councils and state governments have championed the medium to high density development of suburbs, and have a significant power base in shaping the city through planning schemes. The increase in dwelling density provides additional sources of income for councils. Denser populations mean more funding at state and federal levels, though councils also reap significant income from development and building application fees and increased rates volume. At the same time, state governments and councils are able to



decrease the level of amenity provided to neighbourhoods in the form of public infrastructure. McKenzie (2010) believes that the rise of owner corporations and their equivalent are mass privatisations of local government services giving rise to unaddressed problems.

When an owner buys into a strata complex, they cede power to the owner corporation that controls the common property. The common property may include lifts, corridors, car parks and gardens. It may also include services such as roadways, sewerage and stormwater, fire services, air-conditioning, security measures, walls, windows and roof. The greater the number of items included in the common property, the greater the maintenance issues arising over time and the higher the levy contribution collected from each owner. When repair or replacement is required, the owner no longer has control over the timing or cost of repair creating significant financial difficulty for the owner in a contracting economy where personal funds may be limited.

Building multi story accommodation complexes changes the nature of the buildings from domestic construction to more complex commercial construction. There are significant differences in the capabilities required to manage and maintain a commercial building. There is also a significant difference in the life span of domestic and commercial buildings. Somewhere between the 30 and 50 year period, commercial buildings reach the end of their 'economic life'. This is partly due to changing living standards during the building's life span, but also due to the cost of repairing and replacing key services within the building such as air conditioning, lifts, fire services, electrical components, water and sewerage pipes. The closer a building is to the end of its economic life, the cheaper it is to rent or buy.

Often these are the places that are most affordable to rent. They may present a springboard from rental into home ownership. When this occurs, rental accommodation is freed up for new groups of renters.

There is increasing awareness of the aging blocks of units and flats built during the 1960s and 70s. Many of these are now under strata title ownership. Often they are seen as an eyesore due to their dilapidated appearance. Many are close to centres of economic activity. Whereas once they were in outer suburbs, the march of time and urban spread now sees them located in key inner city locations. In short, they are in the right location and in the right condition for land redevelopment through demolition.

Demolition of strata titled buildings based on proportional owner consent has already been enacted in Hong Kong (Nissim 2008, Yip 2010). It leaves a building site suitable for future re-development that further increases urban density. A deteriorated, low density block of flats can be replaced with 10 or more times the number of units

in a new vertical suburb called an apartment complex. 'Yes' I hear you say. 'That's what we need to alleviate homelessness, more accommodation'.

The situation in Hong Kong is different to Australia. Hong Kong's strata demolition legislation was based on the discovery that 800,000 strata complexes contained significant structural defects, creating a sense of urgency (Nissim 2008). Even so, only a small number of complexes have been redeveloped. Hong Kong's anti-common legislation requires a 100 per cent vote from owners to move to proportional voting on demolition legislation. There are also equity considerations. Owners have the right of appeal if their amenity is diminished as a result of the vote to demolish.

An owner corporation may appoint a 'strata manager' to assist them to meet the legislative and contractual obligations of running their organisation. The recently released NSW City Futures figures (August 2011) indicate that a large proportion of strata manager's believe that some existing complexes have reached the end of their useful life and are ready for demolition. The survey indicated that acceptable terms for strata managers for demolition of strata buildings should occur on an 80 per cent owner agreement basis. This is in line with Strata Australia and the Owner Corporation of Victoria's (2010) policy statements.

Strata Australia and its subsidiary state based organisations are there to support strata industry professionals. The more units that a strata manager manages; the greater his level of profit. An owner cannot join these organisations, unless they are also a strata manager. In Australia, the strata industry has a centralised power base that lobbies politicians at a local, state and federal level. There is a synchronicity between local government, developers, the construction and strata industry who also lobby state and federal politicians. This is what Blandy (2010) refers to as 'bundles of power'. It is anticipated that proportional demolition of strata complexes will become law within some Australian states within a 5 to 10 year period.

The demographic of inner city apartment tenants are the under 40 years cohort (Skifter Andersen 2010) able to afford higher inner city rents. The majority of apartment owners are investors. The investors motive is profit. Investors sell when the time and price is right, and the cost of ongoing property maintenance is prohibitive. When an apartment building is emptied of renters, it creates a spike in people seeking rental accommodation elsewhere. Moreover there will be fewer renters moving into home ownership, since apartment buildings and flats are often the first step into home ownership. Here then, we have a doubling effect of increased downward pressure on the rental market and fewer people moving out of the rental market creating scarcity of accommodation. The scarcity of accommodation increases rents in the remaining rental stock.

As smaller suburban unit complexes are eyed for demolition, we fail to see the future impact. Visualise Docklands, Southbank or similar areas on the Gold Coast and in Sydney in 30 years time, and what the impact of releasing substantial numbers of apartment dwellers annually into the rental market will be as those tower blocks are demolished. Consider those who are currently buying into 50+ 'lifestyle' strata developments. Will they be dealing with acquisitive developers seeking to redevelop their homes while in their twilight years and declining into dementia? *What if like Darryl Kerrigan they don't want to move?*

Does the will of 80 per cent of investor-owners override the remaining owner-occupier's rights to retain and live in a deteriorating building? Can an organisation whose purpose is to maintain common property interfere with the right to own or rent an individual apartment? Will there be equity and hardship clauses included in the legislation similar to those in Hong Kong? How we treat the issue of large scale, private rental demolition, the release of large numbers of tenants into the rental market as tenancies are compulsorily relinquished, and the impacting downward spiral on other sections of the rental market will be a testament to our humanity.

Tasmania and Victoria's strata title legislation is undergoing review. The Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment has invited the input of strata managers (not owners or renters) into reshaping the legislation prior to it going out for public review. That places big business at the centre of the legislation rather than renters or owners. Renters and owners will not be consulted except through public review once the legislation has been drafted, or is presented to Parliament. By then it will be too late to have any major impact on shaping the legislation that governs our homes and housing availability, whether rented or owned. ■

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