

**Submission
No 49**

INQUIRY INTO APARTMENT DESIGN STANDARDS

Organisation: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI)

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Submission to Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Apartment living standards

About AHURI

AHURI is a national, independent research network with an expert not-for-profit research management company, AHURI Limited, at its centre.

AHURI's mission is to deliver high quality research that influences policy development and practice change to improve the housing and urban environments of all Australians.

Using high quality, independent evidence and through active, managed engagement, AHURI works to inform the policies and practices of governments and the housing and urban development industries and stimulate debate in the broader Australian community.

AHURI undertakes evidence-based policy development on a range of priority policy topics that are of interest to our audience groups, including housing and labour markets, urban growth and renewal, planning and infrastructure development, housing supply and affordability, homelessness, economic productivity, and social cohesion and wellbeing.

1 Introduction and background

AHURI welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Living Standards in Victoria.

Around 10 per cent of Australians live in apartments, with most apartment residents (85%) in capital cities. This is relevant especially to Melbourne: 121,800 or 23 per cent of Australian higher density dwellings are in greater Melbourne (Easthope et al. 2020).

This submission points to relevant AHURI research that relates to each of the terms of reference to the Inquiry, in three sections:

TOR 1: Examine current apartment living standards in Victoria

TOR 2: Investigate improvements for apartment liveability in building developments including communal areas

TOR 3: Look at initiatives undertaken by other states or nations that have improved apartment design standards

We would also be willing to put you in touch with AHURI researchers with relevant expertise to the Inquiry such as:

- Dr Tom Alves (AHURI Head of Development)
- Associate Professor Hazel Easthope (UNSW)
- Professor Ralph Horne (RMIT)

2 Current Apartment Living Standards in Victoria

The following sections consider outcomes relating to liveability for apartment dwellers in Australia. Section 2.1 looks at broad housing outcomes like locational and community amenity, affordability, and suitability. Design issues (like accessibility and environmental performance) are considered in section 2.2.

Recent issues around the impacts of COVID on apartment dwellings are then discussed in section 2.3. Finally, Section 2.4 looks at outcomes for key groups such as low-income earners, people with disability and older persons.

2.1 Outcomes take more than just design

In understanding living standards and liveability, we need to consider broader ideals around housing and urban spaces rather than shelter more narrowly. Liveability outcomes for apartment dwellers depend not only on the immediate physical infrastructure that is a dwelling, but the wider cultural, economic, and social infrastructures that make living in that space enjoyable and meaningful (AHURI 2020a).

Research evidence suggests experiences of apartment living are mediated by the quality and design of the built environment, the nature and quality of service provision, and the demographic profiles and mix of residents at both the building and local area (precinct) scales (Easthope et al. 2020).

As the recent COVID pandemic has revealed, housing is not currently organised in a way that provides for universal sanctity, security, health, and liveability. Instead, already existing inequalities, together with sensitivities, make for unequal vulnerability (Horne et al. 2020). Those in lower density or detached housing, who had access to a car, income security and hobbies like gardening were at an advantage. Those in more poorly situated, poorer quality housing were more disadvantaged. During the pandemic, occupants of apartments faced a host of issues relating to their dwelling including lack of storage, small kitchens, lack of light, inferior circulation space, privacy and floorplate flexibility (Horne et al. 2020).

2.1.1 Location (access to parks and space, transport, and other amenities)

Access to amenities including both open public space, libraries and communal space is an important issue for many people in apartments since they often trade off space in their home to be near to other amenities and yet for some communities these are in short supply. Even so, some facilities are underutilised, so innovative approaches to design and consultation are necessary. Lower income householders generally have less choice in the type of housing they obtain, and so it is incumbent on governments and developers to ensure that developments have access to amenities (Easthope et al. 2020).

2.1.2 Affordability

Apartments are becoming an important source of accommodation especially for renters. Availability of affordable rental housing continues to be an issue with there being a shortage of housing stock that is affordable to those on lowest incomes (Hulse et al. 2019). Affordability problems occur for many occupants of apartments including in Melbourne. Many have income constraints and requirements to access jobs (e.g., in

hospitality and retail) that make apartments one of the few alternatives (Easthope et al. 2020).

2.1.3 Social inclusion and access to community resources

The physical and social make-up of apartment buildings and the neighbourhood encouraged or hindered social integration, and efforts to manage apartment building common spaces seemed to have been differentiated by socio-economic conditions (Horne et al. 2020).

Because almost two in five Australian residents in apartments are on low income, there is a need to ensure that they have access to essential public infrastructure like community engagement programs and community led activities. However, at present, the outcomes are uneven, especially in some local government areas where lower income residents are having a lower quality of life. Key pieces of public infrastructure include open space, libraries, and community centres (Easthope et al. 2020).

2.1.4 Suitability

An ongoing concern is the issue of overcrowding in apartments including by multi-family households. These concerns have been more pronounced during the pandemic and in places like Sydney but may also be a concern in Victoria (Nazreen and Ruming, 2019; Buckle et al. 2020).

2.2 Design issues

2.2.1 Accessibility

Access to units in high density developments is often problematic – while most developments with three or more storeys are required to have lifts (a result of regulation), access to the units themselves remains difficult for people with mobility or cardio-vascular issues. This is a particular concern with new supply increasingly oriented to higher density housing especially in urban submarkets.

Modifications to housing for people with a disability are often expensive and place households under financial pressure. Many apartments are not suited to alteration. Making changes to housing to accommodate changing needs also creates uncertainty around long term housing (Kroehn et al. 2007). People with mobility impairment often had to make major modifications (Beer and Faulkner 2009), but these modifications often took a long time to occur, especially those that went beyond the standard range (grab rails, accessible showers etc) (Tually et al. 2011).

2.2.2 Environmental performance (energy efficiency, water)

Moves towards greater use of housing density are often associated with improved environmental performance (AHURI 2020; Blair et al. 2004), However the outcomes associated with apartments is equivocal.

AHURI research suggests that the environmental outcomes in much rental housing is not necessarily worse than home ownership – for example, renters often have lower energy use than owners. However, because they often lived in apartments or flats which are more reliant on carbon intensive electricity and they were on lower incomes, they were more likely to have higher energy bills (Wood et al. 2010). Rental investors – including in apartments also saw no incentive in investing in energy or water saving technologies – with the owners' corporation being a significant barrier (Gabriel et al. 2010).

On the other hand, for those householders that were asked about their energy and water usage, moving to an apartment was cited for both increased and decreased use (Fielding et al. 2010).

2.3 Lessons from COVID

COVID-19 has exacerbated vulnerabilities such as poor housing quality and location; housing affordability; energy poverty and a range of social, mental and physical health conditions. Against this were a range of policy interventions, ranging from financial payments and guidelines around housing costs relief, to policing of the restrictions on movement and social distancing, to cleaning and sanitising. These brought significant challenges and responses inside homes and had significant knock-on effects upon relationships and mental and physical health (Horne et al 2020).

The impacts of COVID-19 on renters are yet to be fully felt. While there has been some buffering from eviction moratoriums, rent deferment, savings and superannuation and temporary financial support, the full effects have yet to emerge, and stability in the rental sector is dependent upon long term certainty for renters, investors, and landlords (Baker et al. 2020).

Persons in apartments faced a number of issues, including smaller spaces than detached housing, inflexibility of room-use options and crowded conditions. Some single professional people found working from home enjoyable, and access to a spacious apartment enriched relationships for some couples (Horne et al. 2020). However, it complicated matters for others, with small spaces constraining capacity to work from home, schooling, or exercising within the home. Although around half of all rental respondents indicated they had to work from home during the pandemic, around a third in apartments or flats said their workspace was inadequate (Baker et al. 2020). Lack of space also complicated adhering to the isolation requirements of infected members of the household (Horne et al. 2020).

While apartments involve a trade off in terms of internal space to access many other amenities in the city (e.g., children's playgrounds, open spaces, restaurants, gyms), many of these services were curtailed under COVID-19 restrictions. Those previously reliant on public transport also curtailed their activities like shopping trips and were less able to access or afford alternative forms of transport.

The experience of communal areas varied considerably within different apartment complexes with owners' corporations governing those areas – some run by well-off corporations were well organised with evidence of community spirit, while others were left for individual residents to manage cleanliness and sanitisation processes outside their door. Better coping strategies were evident in facilities where tenants had continuous access to employment and access to local amenities (e.g., river or waterscape). These benefitted the resilience of relatively better off households (Horne et al. 2020). Although social media was used effectively to connect people in apartments during the covid pandemic, many faced isolation and disconnection from their neighbours, and minimal or incidental interaction with others in shared spaces. An exception was an apartment with many younger residents who used a rooftop space to make friends, provided the minimum space/person requirement was followed (Horne et al. 2020).

Issues around lack of amenity may have been compounded in the event of job loss and low income – potentially compromising access to things like affordability of housing, and affordability of heating, risking airborne infection and thus public health outcomes.

Issues were apparent for those with pre-existing complex needs like those in social housing.

For those in apartments, many occupants showed ingenuity in reconfiguring and using multifunction spaces for purposes that had never been envisaged. Spaces that afforded outside views were helpful as workspaces to help people cope with the isolation. However, in many cases the limits imposed by the design were insurmountable. These included lack of:

- acoustic and visual privacy
- natural light
- circulation space
- floorplate flexibility
- thermal comfort (due to orientation of apartment)
- space in the kitchen for continuous food preparation (Horne et al. 2020)

2.4 Outcomes for key groups

Many apartment buildings are marketed to a younger demographic, with the presumption that it might be occupied while the person or couple are young and fully fit. While this may suit the purposes of the developer, it is at odds with the more diverse demographic composition of the community and the many residents that occupy such housing.

It is important that housing, including apartments, meet the needs of diverse groups. This section considers persons who may benefit from apartments but face issues with the type of housing at present. The issues relate in part to the design of housing but also tenure and affordability issues that relate to the housing system more generally.

2.4.1 Lower income residents

Around 39% of households living in apartments are lower income earners (Easthope et al. 2020).

In Melbourne the four main submarkets of low-income residents in apartments include:

- international students and millennials (both renters and owner-occupiers)
- migrant families in public housing
- lower-income workers in private housing
- retiree homeowners and public renters

The apartment stock in Melbourne tends to be concentrated around the central city area. The various lower-income apartment submarket groups can be found in different parts of Melbourne. They can often be found living in the same locations, alongside apartment residents on higher incomes.

2.4.2 People with a disability

People with disabilities are an emerging group in high need of independent housing in the community. The NDIS has opened greater potential for some people with disabilities to procure housing outside the family home or social housing, but suitable

housing is not always available – there is an estimated unmet need for affordable housing for 83,000 to 122,000 participants. The increased provision of new affordable and accessible housing is necessary to meet this emerging demand. This will require use of supply-side subsidies to meet the cost of housing (Wiesel and Habibis 2015).

However, accessing housing in the private market – including apartments - is not always a practical option for people with a disability. Inaccessible design, unaffordability, and discrimination limit access while there are impediments to making modifications (Wiesel et al. 2015).

Social housing – including high density social housing - is an important tenure for people with disabilities also, but people in this housing still face issues. Many are not able to access the priority wait list or overcome bureaucratic hurdles to access housing, while design is often not appropriate to needs, might not accommodate carers or facilitate sharing, and modifications are hard to obtain (Wiesel et al. 2015).

An important principle is to improve choice for people with disabilities and to consult people with disabilities around issues of design (Wiesel et al, 2015). Regulating building codes around accessible and adaptable design is an important way to improve access across tenures. AHURI research suggests that diverse housing options have been used in social housing, from purpose-built housing, purchase of private housing, or obtaining priority social housing (Wiesel et al. 2015). The NDIS (and its associated funding stream for Specialist Disability Accommodation) and programs like Exits Project have opened possibilities for people to access suitable social housing (Wiesel et al. 2015).

2.4.3 Older people

Most older home owners live in detached stock, and most (over 90%) prefer to age in place – usually in their present dwelling. However, some older people decide to downsize into apartments (James et al. 2019). Owners typically wish to retain the high degree of choice and control they have experienced in owning their house, and many seek to remain in home ownership and prize autonomy and independence (Judd et al. 2010; James et al. 2019). Downsizers wishing to sell and purchase a smaller or cheaper home face financial barriers and a shortage of suitable housing in locations they desire (Ong et al. 2019; Ong et al. 2013; James et al 2019; Jones et al 2008). This may mean they preference apartment housing that they own over other forms of housing.

Downsizers may not be knowledgeable or motivated around accessible housing – they are usually motivated by other reasons (e.g., to facilitate lifestyle choices, release equity, or housing alterations to improve comfort) more than improving accessibility. For example, among downsizers aged less than 55, only 29 per cent thought an accessible home was an important consideration in their new house. The proportion increased with age (reaching 44% for 75–84-year-olds) (Judd et al. 2014).

Despite this, downsizers are more likely to be people who face functional impairments such as mobility and activity of daily living problems than other movers (Judd et al. 2014). This may mean the apartment may not be well equipped to deal with issues around accessibility when mobility or falls issues become apparent. Modifications are typically more expensive than accessible, visitable, or universal design and alterations often much harder in apartment buildings.

3 Improvements for Apartment Liveability and Building Developments including communal areas

This section outlines some of the ideas around how governments and developers might work towards improved apartment liveability and building developments in Victoria.

AHURI research suggests that the wellbeing, community, and affordability needs of apartment residents (including those lower incomes) are influenced by a range of policy related factors such as: planning and infrastructure provision, urban design, building design and management, neighbourhood amenities and facilities and ongoing place management and community engagement (Easthope et al. 2020). Because groups such as low-income earners and those with disabilities are often not considered by private developers, they should be actively addressed by government policy. Further reforms should also be considered in the light of the experience of COVID.

The sections below consider urban design and infrastructure (3.1), social inclusive policy processes (3.2), development processes (3.3), planning codes (3.4) and building design (3.5).

3.1 Urban Design and infrastructure

A key area for improvement relates to urban design and in particular inequalities in the distribution and quality of urban services such as parks and open space, local shops and other facilities which were exacerbated under COVID-19 movement restrictions. These were especially apparent in low socio-economic suburbs that also have poorer services and are less resilient (Horne et al. 2020).

However, this issue was also observed in other research relating to some people in apartments (Easthope et al. 2020). There is potential for improvements in urban liveability for people in apartments – including ensuring proximity to healthy, affordable and walkable grocery shops and food outlets (to improve health and environmental benefits) as well as community garden spaces (to ensure access to outside space and food security) (Horne et al. 2020).

3.2 Social inclusive policy processes

One area of vulnerability exposed in the pandemic is around social inclusion, including in apartments. A policy development opportunity relates to how housing can promote community cohesion and social support to build resilience among potentially socially isolated or disconnected households. A few areas might build future resilience:

- Facilitating more digital inclusion and online connections to neighbours
- Configuring social and community services, (e.g., caregiving, libraries) to provide essential sources of connection to those that might be otherwise disconnected (Horne et al. 2020)

There is a need to address these concerns, particular to lower income households in apartments. Required changes range from relatively simple interventions to proposals requiring significant buy-in from both the private and public sectors. These include:

- Ensuring the impact on lower-income residents is a focal point of reviewing development proposals

- Policy coordination across state and federal government and across portfolios
- providing access to free or low-cost services and facilities—both in buildings and in the neighbourhood
- Local Government Areas (LGAs) undergoing densification will need more funding to provide the necessary infrastructure to cater for all residents
- Some building-level issues can be addressed through policies designed to improve education on apartment living, including the costs and obligations involved
- Design review processes—for both apartment buildings and public facilities—should prioritise flexibility. This includes enabling retrofitting in apartments and adaptation of public space
- Planning that enables flexibility to meet the needs of future changes in apartment-resident profiles, including the needs of families with children, older people, pets, and extended families as well as part-time visiting family members (Easthope et al. 2020)

3.3 Development processes

Models of high-density development in Australian cities have privileged market-led delivery of housing (and a reduction in the role of government) in direct housing provision and housing management. But processes to address the needs of low-income households have been minimal and limited to local government (Easthope et al. 2020).

Some development models, like build to rent, have been advocated as a means of building more multi-unit housing for renters. It is sometimes argued these models can involve more large corporate landlords who can offer greater security of tenure for renters. However, the international evidence around their effectiveness and affordability has been questioned without appropriate regulation (AHURI 2019).

There are tensions in delivering high-density buildings and precincts that meet the needs of lower income residents. Policy makers need to balance several competing interests and get timing right to ensure good outcomes in relation to:

- the development and operational phases of a new development
- at the interface between private buildings and the public domain
- alignment of infrastructure needs and delivery
- local and state government responsibilities
- meeting the needs of both current and future residents (Easthope et al. 2020)

3.4 Planning codes

Affordability in apartment housing in Victoria remains an issue. While there is support by the Melbourne City Council to improve provision of affordable apartment housing, this has not translated into delivery, though there are now promising developments in relation to inclusionary zoning (Easthope et al. 2020).

Under the Victorian Planning and Environment Act 1987 there is scope for local governments to provide for Affordable Housing under the s.173 agreements. This use of voluntary agreements has in some ways mirrored the approach in NSW where voluntary and negotiated approaches have dominated (compared to places like South Australia where mandatory mechanisms have occurred). There is scope to consider other types of interventions used in places like Sydney, where affordable housing has been facilitated through inclusionary zoning, density bonuses and negotiated developer contributions (Gurran et al. 2018; Gurran et al. 2008). This might also mean looking at ways for the regulation to be made flexible enough to be 'market enabling' (Gurran et al. 2018).

3.5 Building Design

AHURI research suggests there is potential for improvement in retrofit and design of apartments to meet needs of occupants in light of the experience of COVID-19 pandemic. Areas for improvement in the building code in relation to apartments might include:

- access to a balcony or garden—either individual or communal—and views of greenery
- larger kitchens
- improved storage spaces
- better acoustic insulation and better visual privacy
- capacity for multi-functionality by having an additional room (Horne et al. 2020)

At present policy responses to allow for reconfiguration of dwellings to accommodate working from home and home-schooling are currently limited to a range of tax provisions regarding working from home, and these should be reviewed to allow low-income households equitable access to such upgrades (Horne et al. 2020).

There is a need to improve accessibility in dwellings by addressing regulation through building codes (Wiesel et al. 2015; Judd et al. 2010).

4 Initiatives undertaken by other states or nations that have improved Apartment design standards

AHURI research has not looked in detail at best or good practice initiatives from overseas or interstate in relation to apartment design. However, a couple of cases are provided from recent research.

4.1 Interstate

There are examples of good policy coordination and planning from state and local governments in Sydney in Rhodes West (Canada Bay Council area). The planning provided for developer contributions towards communal open spaces and shopping precincts, and design provided for good connections to street, passive surveillance, wide pathways. Buildings are well designed and maintained. Outcomes include satisfaction by residents (Easthope et al. 2020).

4.2 Overseas

Accessible housing requirements have been introduced in places like England, where they have increased the minimum accessibility standard for newly built housing through legislation.

For example, the **Local Area Plan for London (London Plan)** has successfully required 90 per cent of all new housing be accessible or adaptable and 10 per cent to be wheelchair user dwellings. The Greater London area has the highest level of mandatory accessibility standards in England and the London Plan has been considered successful in bolstering the number of accessible houses in the Great London region. Areas with lower mandatory accessibility standards for newly built accommodation also have lower rates of accessible housing, suggesting that voluntary standards and guidance have not been effective in increasing the availability of accessible housing.

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