



Community BY DESIGN

Architects are experimenting with new forms of housing to help create a more liveable and sustainable city.

STORY: Jane Hutchinson PHOTOS: Shannon Morris

Kerstin Thompson in her 'secret' garden in Fitzroy.

In the back streets of Fitzroy, between buzzy cafes and check-by-jowl workers cottages, is a secret garden secluded behind a high red-brick wall. This quiet haven, shaded by two wattle trees, with a trampoline, barbecue and long wooden table, belongs to architect Kerstin Thompson – or rather to Kerstin and two other families.

The group pooled resources in 2000 to buy a 440-square-metre site that included four red-brick buildings from Fitzroy's industrial past, all facing on to a large common garden. Kerstin's brother and his family moved into the three-storey former Ace Billiards factory on the north side of the site, Kerstin with her young son made a home in the west-facing two-storey former warehouse, and the third family moved into an early-20th-century building on the south side. Kerstin's architectural practice KTA leased the fourth building as its office.

The idea, explains Kerstin, was that rather than each family scraping together funds to buy a small inner-city house with a tiny backyard, as a group they could secure a substantial plot in the suburb they loved, with a large shared garden where the kids could run around. "We could keep an eye on each other's children and share things like toys and garden tools."

But friends and family weren't convinced. "They thought we were mad," recalls Kerstin. "They said, what will you do if there's friction between the households or a dispute and someone wants to sell out. How will you get out of it?"

Almost two decades on, Kerstin says the experience of sharing communal space with two other families, as well as a changing roster of small businesses, has been overwhelmingly positive. "We don't live in each others' pockets; we do our own



The townhouses at Clyde Mews in Thornbury are oriented around communal gardens rather than parking. PHOTO: Alice Hutchinson

thing. But we all love to cook so there's been a lot of shared dinners in the garden. When our families were young there was always someone to watch the kids if you had to go out. Now as we're getting older and the kids are moving out, having that community around is a comforting prospect, knowing there are people nearby if you need them or just want a bit of company."

Although all their homes face the garden, Kerstin says privacy's not an issue. "The way we've managed it is by acting with care and respect towards each other. So you don't stand next to a window watching someone eat their breakfast at the kitchen bench, or if someone has friends over for lunch in the garden, you leave them to it. It's easily managed without having to put up screens."

While Kerstin's housing arrangement might have raised eyebrows 19 years ago, the concepts of shared open spaces and arranging dwellings to foster a sense of community are increasingly on the drawing board as architects explore new ways to shape a more sustainable and liveable city.

With Melbourne's population tipped to reach 10 million by 2050, traffic clogging our roads and infrastructure struggling to keep pace with urban sprawl, the big house on a quarter-acre block with a two-car garage is no longer sustainable as the default housing choice, says urban designer Andy Fergus. But while there has been a boom in new apartments, fuelled by

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population growth and soaring property prices, Andy says many of these have been designed to maximise profit for investors rather than liveability for occupants.

"Real estate agents, developers and banks will tell you there's just three types of housing: apartment towers, suburban townhouses or large dwellings on 650-square-metre blocks, but there are some very successful examples that don't meet that mould," says Andy, who as a director of Melbourne Architours recently led a tour of innovative housing projects around the inner suburbs as part of Melbourne Design Week. "The conversation has shifted from: let's build flats, to what sort of quality of multi-residential housing do we need to create the kind of city we want?"

One of those addressing this question is architect James Legge whose firm Six Degrees has been involved with a series of innovative housing projects around Melbourne, including the groundbreaking Nightingale developments (see breakout). Six Degrees is also behind the Clyde Mews project in Thornbury, which incorporates

six two-storey townhouses and two units on two large suburban blocks, built around a communal garden. Each dwelling has a parking space, but rather than having a garage adjacent to individual homes, parking is lined up side-by-side at one end of the site. This not only frees up space at the centre for shared veggie gardens, but also encourages interaction between residents as they walk to and from their private homes.

"You can't create community through architecture," says James, "but you can foster it and enable it to flourish."

The arrangement has attracted buyers from all life stages, from young families to empty nesters who want a sense of community and space for visiting grandchildren to play. But not everyone gets it. James recalls that one real estate agent tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the developer to squeeze another dwelling into the open space, while the local council insisted that each townhouse have its own private space fenced off from the communal area. Although fencing was at odds with his



Six Degrees director Jame Legge, on the rooftop of the Nightingale 2 development.



vision, James compromised by installing waist-high wire fencing between the townhouses and communal garden to allow interaction with the neighbours.

He says the idea of people sitting out on their back deck, being able to chat to their neighbours passing by, recalls the days when Thornbury and Brunswick were filled with Greeks and Italians who would sit on their front porches all summer, shooting the breeze with people in the street. "There's always been this idea that good fences make good neighbours. But I think good fences make lousy suburbs, quite often."

"We are communal animals. We feel safer and more secure when we know the people around us. Yet we have this funny thing about everything having to be private behind a six-foot fence. I accept most of us need some privacy but it doesn't have to extend to every inch of our property."

While he concedes the idea of community-focused living might not suit everyone, he says it's about giving people choices about how they want to live. "Some people want absolute privacy and that's okay. There's plenty on the market for them. We want to put something different on the market for people who do want it." **B**

Nightingale's call

Ten years ago it would have seemed unimaginable: An apartment development where investor profits are capped and individual apartments have no air-conditioning, no second bathroom, and no car parking,

Yet the Nightingale model, conceived by Jeremy McLeod of Breathe Architecture and backed by a consortium of Melbourne's leading architects, has proved so successful would-be buyers enter a ballot for the chance to buy.

But Nightingale is no ordinary developer. Committed to creating medium-density dwellings that deliver on a triple bottom line – financially, sustainably and socially – Nightingale keeps prices down for buyers by eliminating display suites, marketing brochures and car parking, and capping profits for financial backers.

The buildings are carbon neutral and provide green power to residents at below the cost of conventional power. Residents share a communal laundry, rooftop garden, communal veggie patch and barbecue.

There's also a caveat on the title dictating that buyers can't sell their property for more than the

purchase cost, plus the average price growth for the suburb. The aim is to encourage owner-occupiers rather than investors hoping to flip apartments for profit.

Far from being a turn-off, when the first Nightingale project in Brunswick was launched in 2014, so great was the interest in the five-storey development's 20 apartments, prospective buyers had to enter a ballot. Eighteen months later, 180 people registered interest in the 20 apartments in Nightingale 2, next to Fairfield Railway Station.

A third Nightingale is about to begin construction on Sydney Road, Brunswick, and the group's most ambitious project yet is now being balloted, Nightingale Village, also in Brunswick, is a community of medium-density apartment buildings designed by seven architecture firms with the principles of affordability, sustainability and community imbedded. The developers say it's not an urban experiment, but a chance to change how housing is built more widely and to create smart and liveable density.

The group is also looking at the viability of Nightingale projects elsewhere around the country.