

ARCHITECTURE AUSTRALIA

ARCHITECTURE AUSTRALIA



**JACKSON CLEMENTS BURROWS • BOLLES + WILSON
TOWNSEND + ASSOCIATES ARCHITECTS
BENT ARCHITECTURE • SIX DEGREES
+ A DOSSIER: AUSTRALIAN STYLE**



9 1770003 1872003

04

VOL 101 NO 4 AUD \$14.95
JULY/AUG 2012 ISSN 0003-8725

MODEL HOUSING

“Oh it is magic” was one tenant’s description of residing in Living Places, a new public housing development in suburban Dandenong, thirty kilometres south-east of Melbourne. It was an affirming message to receive as I was welcomed into one of the residences by “Mum” and her family. Crossing the threshold as an outsider to become temporarily immersed within the tenants’ world prompted me to think, “How would I feel about living here?”

This project attempts to dissolve boundaries – some of them physical, others social. This was evident from the outset as I navigated towards Mum’s residence with no

clear driveway, path or mailbox to guide me. Dissolving boundaries is challenging and it can result in disorientation and unease, because boundaries keep things in a way that we are used to, but can also give a sense of freedom and possibility.

Living Places is the result of an architectural design competition of the same name that explored various issues relevant to housing – affordability, sustainability, flexibility – and aimed to push these very boundaries. It started with six typical suburban blocks that were combined to create one site so that the original six dwellings were increased to fifteen.

Left
Fifteen new dwellings have been inserted on six suburban blocks in Dandenong.



A public housing project in Dandenong
by Bent Architecture tests residential boundaries.

Review: Jennifer Calzini
Photography: Trevor Mein



SITE PLAN
1:500



SECTION
1:500

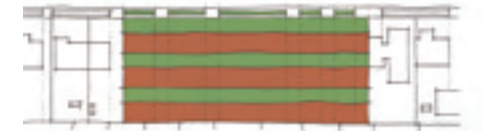
Below
The barbecue becomes a focal point for meeting other residents in the shared outdoor space.



The competition was a joint initiative of the Office of Housing in the Department of Human Services and the Office of the Victorian Government Architect, and followed the success of the K2 apartments by DesignInc, an earlier competition by the Office of Housing completed in 2007. (I was involved during the development of the competition brief and judging phase when I worked at the Office of the Victorian Government Architect.) From a state government perspective Living Places was intended to be a medium-density demonstration project that showcased good design and developed an approach that could be repeated on similar sites. The initiative was a response to three pressing needs: greater density in strategic parts of the city, housing affordability and accommodation to suit changing demographics. Smaller, accessible units were needed for people who might otherwise have to live in care, and larger units were required for the extended families who make up a portion of the population in Dandenong. It was recognized that there would be less private, outdoor space than had been previously available on the four blocks, and this was partly replaced with community or shared space.

The design approach in Bent Architecture's winning entry was to create a potentially continuous urban framework that responded to sun, circulation and community space. This manifested in the plan as bands running east-west through the site, which demarcated alternating strips of landscape and built form in response to solar orientation. Further banding at the scale of each individual unit identified private gardens, habitable space and service space. In the opposite direction, car access bands crossed the site. With communal space as the third layer, an overlay of these three systems created a kind of patchwork groundscape. With such an abstract starting point at the competition stage, it was heartening to see that the built result used interfaces to create an ensemble of tightly knit units and pedestrian spaces.

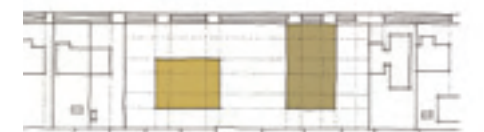
East-west banding
Alternating landscape and housing bands maximize northern edges and create north-facing open spaces and site permeability.



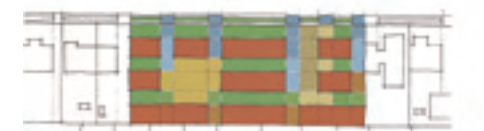
Vehicular and pedestrian paths
Existing crossovers are kept to retain street edge and circulation rhythms.



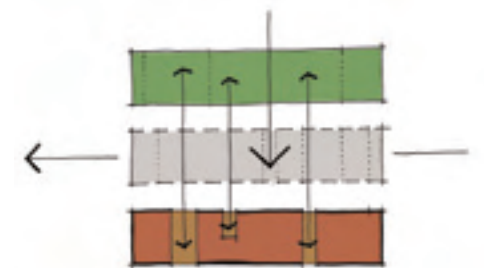
Community spaces defined
Two communal spaces, one for passive recreation and one for active play increase physical and visual permeability and allow neighbourhood surveillance.



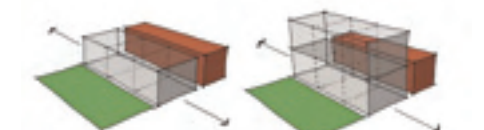
Urban framework
Housing bands, landscape zones, pathways and communal open spaces are overlaid; a solar-responsive and socially engaging urban framework is defined.



Programmatic branding
Habitable and service zones are arranged in accordance with solar orientation and proximity to north-facing private outdoor space.



Habitable stack
Habitable zones are stacked in double-storey (family) units to maximize northern orientation.



Connection to site
Housing units respond to site banding to define private open spaces and connections to urban network.



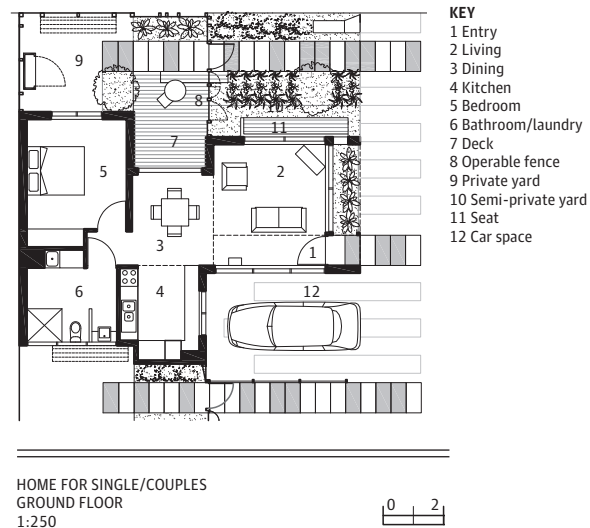


The units themselves are modest and simple. Their colour and roof pitches reference the surrounding houses, but the units stand out as sharper and more purposeful looking. Internally, they are comfortable, open and light with high, raked ceilings and some timber finishes. The architects have produced a “user guide” for tenants to explain the more unusual design ideas such as the use of reverse brick veneer, reduced areas of plasterboard and on-site grey water treatment.

The challenges are really in the spaces outside. There are no fences dividing the units. Tenants must cooperate when using common facilities like the shared barbecue and, as there is no barrier to entering the site, they need to guard their community space. This is much like how a small neighbourhood in Melbourne’s Brunswick might act as custodians for their local park; in this case, the park is the “front yard” of the collective units.

With the disappearance of the traditional front garden, side and backyard, and with the merger of driveway and entry path, some of the usual domestic cues are missing. This is a place where meeting the neighbours becomes less structured – a waiting visitor can sit in the sunny central garden, something not done in a traditional front yard. Projects like this raise questions about how we are to shape our cities as they grow: How much private garden do we want in the suburbs? How close is too close when it comes to walking past someone’s front door? Is there enough scope for residents to control levels of privacy and surveillance?

A series of devices, some of which can be modified by the tenants, help to give identity and layer interaction. But the blinds, small private gardens, movable sections of fence and screen planting provide only a thin buffer and this aspect should be developed further if the model is to be applied to future projects. Walking around the units I felt both a slight unease, as if I were trespassing, and a sense of welcome and fun in exploring the generously designed landscape and seating. Overwhelmingly, I felt excited about the challenges tackled and what has been achieved.



Opposite page
The roof pitches of the units reference the form of the surrounding houses.

Above left and right
The interiors are generous in providing both high ceilings and tactile surfaces such as brick and timber finishes.



**LIVING PLACES
SUBURBAN REVIVAL**

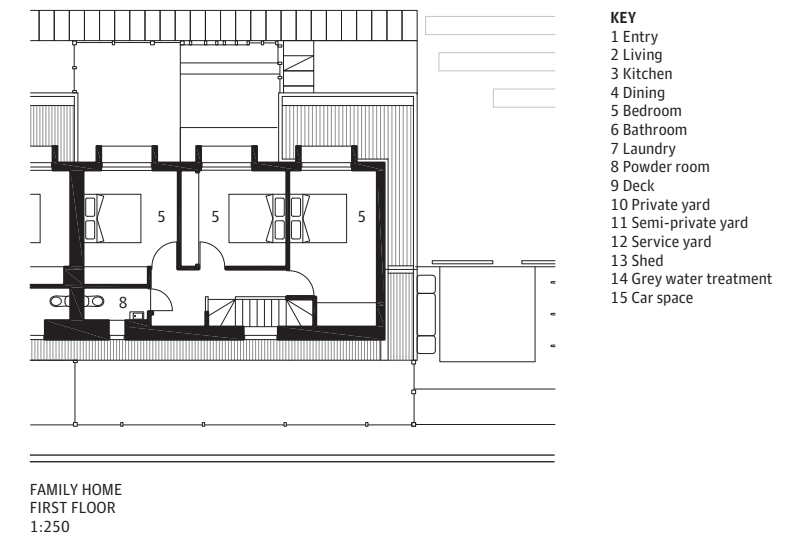
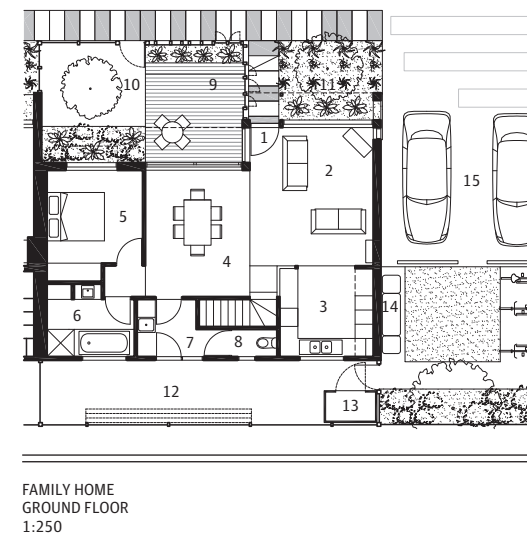
ARCHITECT
Bent Architecture
Project team: Paul Porjazoski, Merran Porjazoski, Louisa Macleod, Fiona Lew, Andre Ullal

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS
Site Office

**STRUCTURAL AND CIVIL
ENGINEERING**
Clive Steele Partners

**HYDRAULIC AND ELECTRICAL
ENGINEERING**
Spa Consulting Engineers

ESD
Third Skin and Greensphere Consulting





Above
The shared pedestrian and vehicular grading and outdoor space among residents blurs boundaries of ownership.

Opposite page
A sign saying "emoh-ruo" sits in a living room windowsill of one of the residents. Backwards it spells "Our Home."

The Residents

Architect Paul Porjazoski of Bent Architecture and *Architecture Australia* editor Timothy Moore talk to Peter and Mum, residents at Living Places, about their new home.



The framework used for Living Places represents, at a domestic scale, a range of boundaries that are being renegotiated around public and private space. Just to show that challenges come in all sizes, the tenants mentioned how not long after the development was completed a group of kids on bikes and skateboards entered the site. Mum, who was strategically placed in her living room to look over the front, shooed them away: "Oh," she said, "do you live in here?" "No, down the street" they replied. Mum retorted, "This is private property," only to receive the response "No it's not, the government owns it." The idea of custodianship is not well developed in our cities, as we think in more black-and-white terms of who owns what. Beyond the suburban scale this has particular implications for our public urban and natural environments, where we need to cultivate custodians to guard and look after these spaces. Local government is an important participant in redefining management structures to make this easier. For instance,

in this project, the installation of the barbecue became a battle because it was unclear who would be looking after its maintenance.

The proposal by Bent takes the suburban block and "mashes" these spaces. How would I feel about living here? I think it would be a challenge. What I have observed is that people are up for this challenge. This project might not be a revolution in architectural design but it shows how a tired suburb and the typology of social housing can be revived and transformed through challenging accepted standards. This project is a very positive step in a larger effort to redefine the suburb, pointing to how a more complex view of ownership and neighbourly interaction might look.

Jennifer Calzini is a Melbourne architect with a strategic role at Hayball and recent experience working with the state government.

TIMOTHY MOORE On the front windowsill there is a sign that says "emoh-ruo." What does this mean?

PETER If you read it backwards, it's "our home."

TM What makes it feel like home?

P It is beautifully set up. Like, because Mum cannot go up the stairs. We've got two rooms upstairs, which is my brother and I up there, we've got our toilet up there too – we can give Mum as much cheek as we want. [Group laughter.] Everything on the ground floor is perfectly set up for Mum.

TM Do you find it easy to move around?

MUM Yes. You sit around this lovely verandah on a chair. When we go out there, then we'll have people come out – they use the barbecue, but not the sitting area.

P We sit out there heaps. Especially at night-time, like when you have a hot day, and it's nice and cool – oh, we'll be sitting out there for a couple of hours. It's magic.

TM How do you compare here to where you lived before?

P It was also a house, but nowhere as good as this.

M It's just easier to get around. The other house we had had very high steps, and I couldn't manage them. And I had a couple of falls on the steps.

P And you don't need an airconditioner in this house. Open that door and do you know how you've got those opening gaps in the fence? You open them out and you get the breeze, and you don't need any airconditioning. In the last house you'd have to have an airconditioner; you couldn't live without an airconditioner.

TM What do you think of the brick that is visible in the interior?

P I love the bricks. It's in my room too. The architects use it for moderating the temperature.

TM And what do you think of the ceiling as well?

P I love high ceilings.

M Now and then there's a few cobwebs up there.

TM Besides spiders, have you met other types of visitors

*“It’s one of the best places we’ve lived in.
Everyone’s, ‘G’day, how are you?’”*



Above
Mum and Peter’s living room provides an aspect over the site, which helps to ensure security and personal wellbeing.

from outside this complex? Do people come over from across the street?

P Yeah. They come across here, but I walk the dog a lot, and I’m always talking to people. We’ve met a few people up the street. It’s a good area. Someone said, “Oh, this area is not a very good area.” I haven’t found any problem with it.

M No, there’s no noise, people are quiet, they don’t argue.

TM How do you find it when you wish to be private? Do you shut the blinds?

P No, we like keeping it open. Mum likes to stickybeak, that’s why there’s chairs here. She gets the best view.

TM What’s the best thing about living here?

P It’s comfortable; it’s home.

TM To play the devil’s advocate, what could be better? Have you come across anything that you think could be better for you?

P No, everything’s magic ... with everything here. Like, we got our gas bill – good gas bill. Forty-five bucks, how’s that?

PAUL PORJAZOSKI That’s pretty good, isn’t it? Well hopefully when you put those heaters on in the winter, because of the brickwork it should actually keep the house warm overnight.

M Yeah, we have run them for a couple of hours ... last week; we ran them a couple of nights ago. They would have felt it upstairs.

P Yeah. We closed all the other doors, but when we come out of our room, oh you could feel the heat, and that went upstairs as well.

M Yes, so no, we’re not sorry we moved in here.

[Group laughter.]

TM You’ll probably get a lot of architecture students trying to move in.

P Yeah. Oh, they’ve got to learn somehow, don’t they?

PP When visitors come, what do they say about it?

P They can’t believe it’s a Commission house. They’ll say ... like, everyone says, “Oh it is magic. How’d you get this?” Yeah, everyone loves it. It’s one of the best places we’ve lived in. Everyone’s, “G’day, how are you?”

TM Thank you for letting us come in and have a look at your place.

P That’s no problem, yeah. I’m sorry I couldn’t complain about anything. [Group laughter.] There’s nothing ... nothing I don’t like about it.