

Multi-residential housing in Australia has typically carried many negative connotations. But as a housing typology, it's slowly shaking off its bad reputation thanks to evolving social and economic factors – and, in particular, forward-thinking architects, designers and developers driven by aspirations for compelling, design-led dwellings.

Many high-density apartment buildings are defined by bare white walls, clunky spaces with minimal access to natural light and ventilation, and a decided lack of community. Producing hundreds of apartments and minimising costs with cheap materials is a model frequently implemented, however, the benefits of designing and building to this tune have proved limited and short-lived, not to mention harmful for the environment. A surplus of these types of dwellings is imminent in Australia, with the largest over supply believed to be inner-city apartments along the east coast.

The reasons for this surplus can't be reduced to one specific cause; they are widespread – from the appeal of low interest rates and first homeowner grants to the outflow of migrants following COVID-19. Regardless, these emptying high-rise apartment towers are a grim reminder of a desperate need to reevaluate how and why we build within this sector.

Thankfully, change is circulating in Australia and, with it, an exciting landscape spanning low, medium and high-density design and construction is emerging. Associate Director of Ewert Leaf Josh McLean says that we're experiencing a "considerable shift in the social perception of multi-residential living. Gone is the association with mass production, poor amenity and compromised living environments." A new model is becoming increasingly prevalent – one that is considerably more attractive as a place to call home. Architects and developers are seeking out sites within well-connected

Designing for People and Planet—

Redefining Multi-Residential Living

Words by Millie Thwaites • Photography by Tom Ross, Rory Gardiner and Gavin Green



Breese Street by DKO and Breathe Architecture, developed by Milieu and photographed by Tom Ross.

and community-minded pockets, offering residents a more affordable and environmentally sound investment, often within a neighbourhood they've long desired or lived in. "A new multi-residential alternative to the traditional quarter-acre block embodies the spirit of the stand-alone home while creating wider accessibility to a high standard of living," Josh says.

Shannon Peach, Director of Melbourne-based developer Milieu, agrees. "The demand for better developments has absolutely grown, in particular over the past five years, because the general public's understanding of sustainable design has come forward in leaps and bounds," he says. Inherently inspired by place and people, each Milieu project is conceived to make a positive contribution to its setting, responding to context through materiality and form. "As a company, we're guided by a belief that our homes, neighbourhoods and surroundings aren't merely observed but are felt – this is because what constitutes a 'successful' development really depends on how

it is experienced and felt by its community for years to come," he says. Often complemented by a compelling food and beverage offering operated by sibling company Milieu Hospitality, Milieu's projects are more than collections of dwellings; they inspire conversation and bring a certain energy to the neighbourhoods they sit within.

Aware of the construction industry's contribution to climate change, Shannon says that, as a developer, Milieu strives to stay on the pulse in terms of research and design. The company has recently become B Corp Certified, "recognising a commitment to stakeholder – not just shareholder – value and meeting the highest standards of social and environmental performance to balance profit and purpose." What's more, Milieu's soon-to-be completed Brunswick East project was the first to be awarded the Moreland City Council Design Excellence Scorecard in 2019, acknowledging the ecological sustainability of the project alongside community-centric criteria.



231 Napier Street by Edition Office, developed by Milieu and photographed by Rory Gardiner.



Multi-residential projects that prioritise these factors are becoming more prevalent for good reason; they're more highly sought after than ever before. Bonnie Herring, Director of Architecture and Head of Sustainability at architecture firm Breathe, believes consumers are becoming "increasingly more environmentally cognisant." She adds that "there does seem to be less time between examples of aspirational mid-rise apartment buildings lately. Smaller practices are delivering fresh perspectives on housing, while apartment standards and improving construction codes are raising the bar."

Encouragingly, there are many compelling examples to learn from. 122 Roseneath Street by Fieldwork illustrates a sensitive architectural response to multi-residential living. Conceived as a collaboration between the architect, prospective residents and the local community, this project facilitates interaction and encourages connection to place. A strong focus on quality and sustainability is realised through an emphasis on amenity, privacy, communal facilities and access to light and air. As well as this, two landscaped terraces referred to as 'linear parks' intercept the building and occupy more than one third of

the overall footprint. Also in Melbourne, The Lothian by Kennedy Nolan exudes generosity – in space, volume, and privacy – across an unusual housing mix of four-storey townhouses and two-storey apartments, each with roof gardens.

Breathe and Nightingale Housing Co-Founder Jeremy McLeod is buoyed by these examples, which highlight the industry's shifting priorities. "The inner north of Melbourne is now peppered with all electric buildings; net zero buildings with building ratings out over 7.5 stars; buildings with community built into their DNA, with rooftop gardens and greenery spilling out from their edges," he says. This paints a desirable picture, and Melbourne-based developer Neometro's design-driven projects have arguably had a hand in defining it. "For us, design is paramount," says Founder Jeff Provan. Tellingly, however, design alone is never pursued at the cost of the company's core values surrounding sustainability, liveability and longevity – rather, it is balanced with these.

"Considering the design in terms of acoustics, light, volume, crossflow ventilation and flexibility, as opposed to how luxurious the finishes are, is central to what we value at Neometro, and that philosophy hasn't changed

for the last 30 years," Jeff says. Materiality and community take precedence, directed by a deeply informed approach to human-centred development and design. Communal rooftop gardens are used for planting workshops and group harvests, natural materials are prevalent, and French and Japanese design philosophies are continuously channelled. Fundamentally, Neometro creates buildings that people want to live in and, therefore, will take care of. "We believe in using materials in their natural state, allowing them to wear in, not out," Jeff says. "Ultimately, we want our apartments to be like a great pair of shoes. The shoes you wish you bought two pairs of, that look even more beautiful after they have been worn for a decade and resoled five times."

There is insurmountable value in designing for people and place with longevity front of mind, and there is no doubt that the demand for socially, financially and environmentally sustainable housing is increasing. The beast that is the multi-residential sector is varied and complex, but its very identity is inexorably changing for the better – one informed, design-led project at a time.