



Australian Institute of Architects

28 April 2016

Yvonne Goedemondt  
Department of Housing  
Northern Territory Government  
Floor 6, RCG Centre  
47 Mitchell Street, Darwin, NT 0800

Dear Yvonne,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Department of Housing's proposed remote housing designs. The Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) and its Northern Territory members in particular have extensive experience in design of climatically responsive and culturally appropriate housing for Indigenous Australians living in remote and urban settlements throughout the NT. We encourage the Department of Housing to avail itself of this expertise.

The Institute's Indigenous Housing Policy makes clear that it "supports the urgent need to improve the poor standard of housing for Indigenous people across Australia in urban, rural and remote areas." However, the Institute is critical of policies "that have introduced 'new ideas' to reduce the short-term capital cost of houses, which have then consequently reduced housing standards, increased running and maintenance costs for residents, and led to premature housings failure." (AIA, Indigenous Housing Policy).

The Institute does not seek to endorse a particular design outcome. Rather it firmly believes that when good processes are followed, good design will result. You may find, for example, that a broadly consultative approach does not lead to a one-size-fits-all design. On the other hand the constraints within which housing is to be delivered (e.g. cost and time) may dictate a standardised strategy. If this is the case than the consultation process, so informed, may result in optional alternative layouts within a standardised architectural language. Added variations to roof forms and building siting can then respond to local conditions and cultural needs, and contribute to a better sense of place making.

You might consider a range of affordable designs, say 4 or 5, with standardised wet area layouts and details that could be discussed with householders. Using a checklist of considerations and professional assistance, tenants could be involved in selecting the most appropriate design and siting to suit their needs. This is not unlike the approach used with first home buyers who might go to a spec home builder offering a number of design options.

We note that the proposed generic designs are to be used in both arid and tropical climates, and that the structural design is to suit all terrain categories. The differences in designs appear to be minimal, and revolve largely around a change in window type, truss selection and eaves detailing. We suggest that a more nuanced consideration of climate and location would lead to better, more appropriate designs, and indeed potential cost savings. Following are a number of more specific comments for your consideration.

### **Climatic response**

- Wider eaves overhangs to ensure adequate sun and rain protection. This is especially important in a generic design where siting is unknown but where a variety of sun angles and rain directions relative to the siting should be addressed.
- With an assumed east-west orientation, window sizes should be reduced on the narrow sides of the building to minimise heat gain.
- Verandas could be better sheltered from the SE winds on the arid designs.
- A more generous covered area at the back door.

## **Housing for Health**

The *National Indigenous Housing Guide* is an essential resource for design of housing in remote communities. It provides a range of recommendations. We highlight a few in relation to the proposed plans.

- Additional floor waste in the bathroom.
- A set down to the hallway graded to the external door to ensure that a drain blockage did not lead to water entering the living areas.
- More shelving in the kitchens and laundries.
- Space between benches and walls in kitchens.

## **Disability access**

It is not clear from the drawings how disability access will be provided to the front door and to at least one bedroom. A clear disability access strategy will improve the functionality of the house as well as its visitability.

## **Energy performance**

It is not clear from the drawings how the blockwork walls will meet the energy provisions of the BCA. Walls may need to be lined and insulated internally or externally to achieve the necessary R rating. Depending upon the siting of a generic house, windows may need to be shaded.

## **Community development**

Standardised housing components are financially sensible. They also lend themselves to good skills training and employment opportunities. While housing supply is a critical need in remote communities, so too is economic development. Through careful consideration of building processes and procurement strategies, and an understanding of community capacity, it is possible a housing program can also be a community development one.

## **Tenancy support**

It is easy to build houses. It is difficult, however to support tenancies. Does the Department of Housing have a locally based, culturally responsive tenancy management system for the proposed new housing? This will be critical for housing allocations, for ensuring that tenant and DHsg responsibilities are clearly understood, for visitor management, for timely responses to repairs, and for cyclical maintenance. It is often the case that new housing addresses one problem but inadvertently creates another.

The Institute of Architects believes that housing is not simply a thing that is delivered at the end of a construction contract. Rather it is a process and experience that occurs over time. Housing starts with committed community engagement, it extends to design, it includes procurement, and it continues into and beyond occupancy.

We trust these comments are helpful, and welcome the opportunity to assist the NT Government with their continued development of considered approaches to housing for all Territorians.

Yours sincerely



Andrew Broffman RAIA  
NT Chapter President  
**Australian Institute of Architects**

*This submission was prepared by Andrew Broffman (NT Chapter President) and Simon Scally (Immediate Past President) on behalf of the NT Chapter Council.*