



Australian Institute of Architects

5 February 2016

Department of Housing
Northern Territory Government
c/o KPMG, by email:
AUFMNTHousing@kpmg.com.au

Dear Sir/Madam:

Re: Housing Strategy Consultation Draft

I am writing on behalf of the Northern Territory Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects, in response to the Housing Strategy Consultation Draft. The Institute acknowledges the work of the Department in preparing this Strategy, and is supportive of the initiative taken by Government to positively address the complex issues presented by the question of housing.

In our view, the draft as released appears to capture some of the important issues. There is much to be commended about the aims and intentions of this document. What is not clear, however, and that to which we urge Government apply even keener intellect and wisdom, is the policy response to this strategy. It is a sage reminder that the instances are few where governments, of any persuasion, have been able to deliver on such intent. We therefore take the opportunity in the remainder of this submission to present some of the key principles that we urge Government to take into account in the formulation of their forthcoming Housing Strategy.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Simple things, done well, rather than high minded statements of intent, are in our experience what matter when it comes to housing. Houses need to be well designed, thoroughly thought through and documented to ensure that builders understand the expectations. They should provide durable healthy living environments. If they do this, they will also last longer and be pleasant places to raise families. They will help establish stronger communities, which in turn places less strain on other Government resources, such as social services.

DEVELOPING STRATEGY – SOME KEY PRINCIPLES

What does “success” look like for a Housing Strategy? Again, we believe it comes down to simple things:

- well considered and clearly articulated briefing, from government, to stakeholders, and in particular, clients
- procurement processes that place less emphasis on the ‘value for money’ equation and are more holistic in their assessment criteria;
- reasonable and well communicated expectations with respect to timing and delivery
- appropriate selection & quality of materials, based on performance as well as cost, as the basis of standards and specifications
- a return to the IHANT design guidelines, which set minimum design standard over and above the National Construction Code
- ensuring that qualified and experienced people manage contracts to ensure that projects are delivered as documented
- the development and provision of a range of housing options relative to life stage and circumstance
- a view of housing that places as much emphasis on the place that they are part of, as part of a strategy for creating stronger and more sustainable communities
- an emphasis on integration rather than the simplistic public housing ‘estate’ model
- support for infill development and models of housing that contribute to increasing the overall density of existing urban environments
- flexibility of delivery models to allow for a variety of circumstances; and
- support for mixed use development that provides other co-located community services

You will note that in the above we place an emphasis on long-term thinking and investment, over and above the immediate outcome. We urge Government to view housing as a community asset whose value is realised over decades, not years. We stress that housing must be considered not just as an end itself, but as part of a broader framework that involves a range of other government services, not least of which are Social Services and Planning, as well as the provision of the range of basic services required by residents.

HOUSING AND LAND USE PLANNING

How will the new housing policy align with land use planning? We believe this is a fundamental question that is not yet answered by the draft strategy, and one critical to any future success.

Given the emphasis in the draft strategy for an increase in one bedroom accommodation, for example, does this indicate an opportunity for an increase in housing density in urban and regional development, rather than new land releases? We believe it does, and that new, denser housing located in close proximity to existing services would be an efficient and cost-saving approach that provides higher levels of amenity to current and future residents.

REMOTE HOUSING

We recognise that the provision of remote housing is one of the specific charges of the Northern Territory Government.

For us as an architectural community, the sad and untimely passing of Paul Pholeros in recent days is a reminder that the principles of remote housing have already been researched and documented. Paul, an architect and tireless advocate for improving the lives of Indigenous communities through housing, was one of the principle authors of the Housing for Health guide, which is available online, free of charge, at www.housingforhealth.com

As 2014 Australian Institute of Architects Gold Medalist, Adrian Welke of Troppo Architects, has remarked,
“Anybody who is in the field of designing and specifying new houses in Aboriginal communities would be negligent if they’re not using that document”.¹

We therefore commend this document to Government as the basis of this aspect of the forthcoming Housing Strategy.

WHAT ARCHITECTS CAN OFFER

We believe that architects, as design professionals, have a great deal to contribute to the delivery of quality housing that is both long lasting, high in amenity, and affordable. But equally we recognise that in the context of the housing market, it is highly unlikely that this will ever take the form of an individual service relationship – it is neither a practical nor economically reasonable suggestion. Rather, we propose that the best use of design professionals, such as architects, in the context of a mass market commodity, such as housing, is at the strategic level.

Darwin, for example, has a legacy of affordable and well designed housing that are now synonymous with the tropical lifestyle. Typologically based, but mass produced, these were prepared by design teams under the scrutiny of government. They are a remarkable success story for the fact that they implement sound design principles in a manner that is both affordable, achievable within the context of the skills available, quick to build, and resonant with their climatic conditions. The Department could do much worse than to engage a couple of talented design architects to develop a number of prototypes for the current market, responding to the challenges identified in the draft Strategy.

Contemporary precedent for a similar principle is provided by the NSW Government, which has incorporated the Government Architects Office as a strategic design arm within the Department of Planning. Complementing the above engagement of design thinking, the Department may well find that the experience of architects presents an important contribution to the development of the Housing Strategy.

¹ “Paul Pholeros: Architect behind best practice for Indigenous housing dies aged 62” – http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-02/renowned-architect-paul-pholeros-dies-aged-62/7134916?WT.ac=statenews_nt Accessed Feb 3, 2016

LIMITATIONS OF THE “HOUSING CONTINUUM” CONCEPT

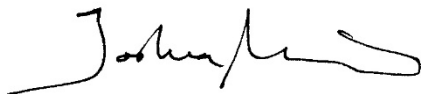
While we endorse the principle of the housing continuum, insofar as it recognises a range of stages and situations in relation to the services required of and provided by Government, we are concerned that it might be interpreted as suggesting a quasi evolutionary path from homelessness to home ownership that simplifies more complex issues. We suggest that it might better be described as simply *‘the housing experience’*², which may prompt a more integrated approach.

START NOW

The evidence of the effort in recent years is that government has supplied poorly designed and constructed dwellings at a rate that does not keep pace with building losses, let alone increased demand. Certainly in recent years, our members have recounted numerous examples in which poor process, build quality, and unrealistic expectations have prevailed – ultimately at cost to both the user, government, and by extension, taxpayer. Given this cost to community – local and at-large – we urge Government to think more carefully, and demonstrate leadership, as they attempt to provide quality housing for all Territorians.

We look forward to continuing to engage with the Department as the Policy is developed, and are keen to offer the expertise of members in informing the discussion.

Yours sincerely,



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This submission was prepared for and on behalf of NT Chapter Council, with contributions from NT Chapter President Simon Scally, NT Chapter President (elect) Andrew Broffman, and Col Browne and Steve Huntingford.

² Centre for Appropriate Technology, 2013. *Housing Experience: Post Occupancy Evaluation of Alice Springs Town Camp Housing 2008-2011*, Centre for Appropriate Technology, Alice Springs. NT.