



Putting design first: six social housing projects from around the world



Dortheavej residence in Copenhagen. Social housing accounts for about 20% of all housing stock in Denmark and is available to anyone, regardless of income. Photograph: Rasmus Hjortshøj

Australia's commitment to social housing is far outstripped by rising demand. With greater opportunity, architects could deliver world class designs

By [Maddie Thomas](#)

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The social housing of last century often calls to mind towering blocks of flats, poorly maintained with dark, pokey and cold units. But alongside a rise in [community living](#), the 21st century has brought quality construction, sustainability, and quality of life to the forefront of social housing design.

Australia's [commitment to and funding for social housing stock is limited](#). But by 2037, [Australia is estimated to have 1.1 million people seeking social housing](#). Professor of architecture and head of the University of NSW's school of the built environment, Philip Oldfield, says that for an investment in social housing to match cosmopolitan cities like Paris or Barcelona, more housing of quality needs to be built.



‘With social housing, you’re not trying to create a profit,’ Prof Philip Oldfield says, which means architects can consider broader life cycle factors. Photograph: Christopher Hopkins/The Guardian

“Architects are trained in this ... so when they’re given the opportunity to do it well, Australian architects will create as good a housing as anywhere else in the world,” he says.

“At the moment, the system, with few exceptions, doesn’t give them that creative opportunity to deliver ... the kind of world class social housing we would love to see.”

While Australian not-for-profits are building design-led affordable housing for low to middle income earners, government-funded social housing for those on waitlists is lacking. Oldfield says organisations like Nightingale Housing are pioneers in built-to-rent housing, with 20% of apartments assigned to community housing providers for those most in need. But examples like [Sydney’s Sirius building](#), previously owned by the state government, show that Australia needs more purpose-built social housing to cater to demand and match international standards.

“In conventional market-led housing, you build for the people who purchase the house ... so you don’t consider as much the energy bills that are going to accumulate over time,” he says.



Sydney's Sirius building, previously owned by the state government, has now become luxury apartments. Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

“With social housing, you're not trying to create a profit so you can consider things like the life cycle costs for housing in a much more significant way.”

Social housing projects need not be as ambitious as [reimagining Buckingham Palace as a co-living space](#), but policies must drive change.

From modest blocks to those of scale, here are six social housing projects that put design first.

Mexico City, Mexico

Mexico has a troubled history when it comes to social housing. The early 2000s saw a boom that went bust, with many badly built neighbourhoods built en masse devolving into isolated dormitory cities that have [since become slums](#), including in Mexico City.

An overhaul of policy in the 2010s saw architects becoming more involved in [more inventive designs for social housing](#).



Michan Architecture's Z53 social housing project uses brick and reinforced concrete to withstand Mexico City's earthquakes and warm climate. Photograph: Rafael Gamo

Built in 2012, [Z53 social housing](#) was [Michan Architecture](#)'s first project. Founding partner and architect Isaac Michan says the social housing landscape in Mexico City has changed a lot since then.

"Now I see that there's more design projects in social housing, with design architects involved," says Michan.

Mexico City has a [history of earthquakes](#), and Z53 social housing has strong reinforced concrete frames and concrete columns in the basement car park supporting it. With 42 one- or two-bedroom units across three “towers”, brick is the feature, with no need for extra finishes and serves as insulation to cater to the warm climate.

Along with a common shared rooftop garden and underground parking, each tower has an interior courtyards, with bridges across open patios connecting them together.

Michan says there is plenty of appetite to right the wrongs of the city’s isolated affordable housing, with some of the country’s most famous architects designing social housing.

“It’s more political and economical, because architects, especially in Mexico, I think, are willing to work on this.”

Paris, France

France has more than 4.5m social housing units available to low to middle income earners, as well as essential workers. Anne-Cécile Comar, founding architect and principal at [Atelier du Pont](#) says there is a “very big” culture of social housing of France.

“It’s really an important issue for French architects, and it’s really the base of our profession.”

Since a law passed in 2000, 25% of all housing stock in urban municipalities must be social housing. Those who fail to meet the minimum are fined.

“The policy is to have social housing that you can’t detect is different from private housing,” Comar says.

“It’s the same quality of construction, same quality of facades, and usually it’s even better – social housing – than private.”

Since its introduction, between 2001 and 2019 [France built approximately 1.8m social housing units](#).



Atelier du Pont's social housing project in the Marais neighbourhood combines 17th-century passageways and courtyards with a new contemporary facade. Photograph: Frederic Delangle

But in Paris, you have to do a lot with a little. Land is expensive and neighbourhoods are dense. In [Belleville](#), in the city's north-east, Atelier du Pont's social housing block blends into the streetscape from the front, but a green courtyard and alley way at the back show off another facade.

Nineteen units fit into two volumes made from prefabricated concrete – one black, one white. Units are small, but with balcony views over the rooftops of Paris. It is such luxuries – balconies, trees, or windows – that Comar says everyone should be afforded.

“There are people that are not very wealthy, but they deserve our passion and love,” she says.

“We always fight with the client to have a big windowseveryone is telling you to have small windows, because it is better for insulation ... but we are very convinced that light is one of the joys of life. So we need big, big windows.”

In [the Marais](#), one of Paris' most fashionable and most dense neighbourhoods, Atelier du Pont [retrofit an existing building into 30 social housing units](#), combining a new contemporary facade with metal shades, with the 17th-century passageways and courtyards, bringing new life to the old site.



‘Light is one of the joys of life’ ... large windows are a focus of Atelier du Pont’s social housing in Belleville. Photograph: Takuji Shimmura

But social housing of such quality, with minimum standards for construction and acoustics, surface, structure, and for accessibility, it can also prove a problem. People stay put and there is little movement in the city.

“Sometimes, clients say to us, ‘Well they are too nice, they are too beautiful’, because people won’t go!”

Barcelona, Spain

Social housing in Spain is under stress. Primarily owner occupied, only 2% of housing stock is available for social rental.

In Barcelona, which has recently [banned](#) tourist apartments, reform has been introduced to make a minimum of 30% of new homes and major renovations protected housing.

[Peris + Toral Arquitectes](#) built [Cornella](#) in Barcelona in 202. The five storey, 85 unit block was built to serve a range of demographics, 20 minutes from the city’s most famous tourist attractions.

Cofounder and architect José Toral took inspiration from Japan, where rooms change use throughout the day. He says the project asks the question, “How should we live in the 21st century, other than being a nuclear family?”



The largest wooden-structured residential building in Spain ... the Cornella development in Barcelona. Photograph: Jose Hevia

With 18 two or three bedroom apartments per floor, units have private balconies bringing light and private outdoor space, in addition to the communal inner courtyard and commercial space on the ground floor.

The building is also the largest wooden-structured residential building in Spain, built with 8,300 cubic metres of wood from the Basque Country. With a timber shell, and use of timber throughout the interior, Toral also says that social housing is an investment in society – one that can help to lower emissions when built right.

“The approach to sustainability has to be environmentally, social and economically sustainable,” says Toral.

“It is about doing the most, with the least.”

Los Angeles, US

Los Angeles has a long history of what are known as “[dingbat apartments](#).” Two or three storey blocks that stretched along the length of a street front, the stereotypical cramped affordable housing became a feature of the landscape in the 1960s.



Developers in the 1950s and 60s aggressively replaced Los Angeles' older buildings with economical two- or three-story 'dingbat' apartment complexes. Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

But even today, Kevin Daly, founder and principal architect of [Kevin Daly Architects](#), says that "California is a poster child for lack of housing availability."

Daly's practice built [Broadway Affordable Housing](#) in 2012, and it is no dingbat.

One side of the project faces and spans the length of the street, but its four buildings are arranged around a starfish shaped courtyard and flanked by trellis timber walkways.

"We wanted to have one facade that was environmentally engaged, so that the building performed," says Daly.

The 33 units are not air conditioned, but the building is designed to naturally cool and be self-sufficient in the mild Los Angeles climate.



Built around an existing tree in its centre, LA's Broadway House features four buildings arranged around a starfish shaped courtyard. Photograph: Iwan Baan

The facade has geometric window hoods that play with the sun, but provide shading throughout the day, and windows have durable storefront glazing. Each apartment is oriented to have access to natural light but has enough privacy from the timber balustrades that residents can open their windows for ventilation.

Built for those on 30%-60% of the area's median income, rents range from about US\$560-\$1300 a month.

Daly says that the site plan having a connection to the environment is a must. Built around an existing tree in its centre, Broadway takes pressure off the smaller living quarters by giving residents ample outdoor and communal indoor spaces to come together for children to play.

Vienna, Austria

With a [reputation as one of the most livable cities in the world](#), Vienna's social housing has a long history. In the 1920s, communal housing blocks or "Gemeindebauten" were built across the city. [They aimed to transform industrial areas](#) that had become obsolete after the second world war and provide housing to the middle classes.

"There is a tradition of social housing in Vienna, and it is not just used as an electoral tool at the last minute," says Luis Basabe Montalvo, founding partner of architecture firm Arenas Basabe Palacios. It is part of the urban tissue, he says.



‘There is a tradition of social housing in Vienna.’ A Gemeindebau in der Barthgasse. Photograph: Gerhard Trumler/Imagno/Getty Images

“To build the city should be more like cooking a paella than preparing a plate of cupcakes: it involves complex hierarchies of ingredients and sequences of actions,” says Montalvo.

“It demands clear plans but also the capacity to improvise.”

[Many of Vienna’s Gemeindebauten remain today](#), but after winning one of the city’s many [design competitions](#), Arenas Basabe Palacios was commissioned to build [Sonnenblumenhäuser](#) (Sunflower Houses) at Wildgarten, a 10ha neighbourhood owned by Vienna city council.

The 11 blocks house three different sizes of unit, with the height of the block determined by unit size, ranging from those for singles to families. The [walls are made of “porotherm”](#) – an engineered clay block – to keep units cool.



A colourful signpost for visitors and residents alike ... Sonnenblumenhäuser (Sunflower Houses) in Vienna. Photograph: Kurt Hoerbst

Fulfilling the four pillars of the competition – social sustainability, architecture, ecology and economy, the housing gives residents a sanctuary, despite a train line on one side and cemetery on the other. Square gardens are nested around each block and cafes are built into the ground floors of some buildings. A striking yellow facade made of ceramic ventilated tiles act as a colourful signpost for visitors and those who call them home.

Copenhagen, Denmark

Social housing in Denmark is available to anyone, regardless of income. Highly regulated to ensure quality construction, social housing accounts for about 20% of all housing stock in Denmark.

In 2013, global architecture firm Bjarke Ingels Group was commissioned by Lejerbo, a Danish organisation building housing for those in need, to design “Dortheavej” – a social housing block in Copenhagen.



A winding wall of social housing ... Dortheavej in Denmark. Photograph: Rasmus Hjortshøj

Bjarke Ingels' "winding wall" of social housing has 66 units for low-income citizens, with a small balcony and floor-to-ceiling windows in each.

"The stacking of prefabricated elements consisting of two kinds of stacked modules, which are repeated to create the characteristic chequered pattern," says Kai-Uwe Bergmann, partner at Bjarke Ingels.

"By gently adjusting the modules, the living areas open more towards the courtyard while curving the linear block away from the street to expand the sidewalk into a public square"

The stairwells allow for the units to be filled with daylight, and views of the neighbouring green space. Pathways through the site give access to the street. The apartments themselves range from 60 to 115 sq m, but with open plan designs, space within the units themselves is flexible.