

ULTRA

Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis

TO CITE THIS PAPER | Elsie Telford, Akari Nakai Kidd and Ursula de Jong. "Beyond the 1968 Battle between Housing Commission, Victoria, and the Residential Associations: Uncovering the Ultra Positions of Melbourne Social Housing." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 38, Ultra: Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis*, edited by David Kroll, James Curry and Madeline Nolan, 274-284. Adelaide: SAHANZ, 2022. Accepted for publication December 1, 2021. DOI: 10.55939/a4022pplql



Image: Michaelmore, Roeger & Russell, *Chester House*, Belair 1966, State Library of South Australia BRG 346/28/6/2.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS, AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND (SAHANZ) VOLUME 38

Convened by The University of Adelaide, School of Architecture and Built Environment, Adelaide,
10-13 November, 2021.

Edited by David Kroll, James Curry and Madeline Nolan.

Published in Adelaide, South Australia, by SAHANZ, 2022.

ISBN: 978-0-646-85443-4

Copyright of this volume belongs to SAHANZ; authors retain the copyright of the content of their individual papers. All efforts have been undertaken to ensure the authors have secured appropriate permissions to reproduce the images illustrating individual contributions. Interested parties may contact the editors.

ULTRA

Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis

SESSION 3: *Housing and Context*

Beyond the 1968 Battle between Housing Commission, Victoria, and the Residential Associations: Uncovering the Ultra Positions of Melbourne Social Housing

Elsie Telford

Deakin University

Akari Nakai Kidd

Deakin University

Ursula de Jong

Deakin University

Keywords

Housing Commission
Victoria
Residential Associations
Melbourne
Fitzroy
Carlton
Housing

Abstract

In 1968, the Housing Commission, Victoria, built a series of high-rise towers in response to an identified metropolitan planning issue: urban sprawl and the outward growth of metropolitan Melbourne. This "solution" precipitated a crisis in urban identity. The construction of the first of a series of these modern high-rise towers at Debney Park Estate, Carlton and Park Towers, South Melbourne displaced significant immigrant communities. This became the impetus for the formation of Residential Associations who perceived this project a major threat to existing cultural values pertaining to social and built heritage.

This paper examines the extremely polarising events and the positions of both the Housing Commission and the Residential Associations over the course of fifteen years from 1968. The research is grounded in an historical review of government papers and statements surrounding the social housing towers, as well as scholarly articles, including information gathered by Renate Howe and the Urban Activists Project (UAP, 2003-2004). The historical review contextualises the dramatically vocal and well-publicised positions of the Residential Associations and the Housing Commission by reference to the wider social circumstances and the views of displaced community groups. Looking beyond the drama of the heated debate sparked by this crisis, the paper exposes nuances within the positions, investigates the specifics of the lesser known opinions of displaced residents and seeks to re-evaluate the influence of the towers on the establishment of an inner urban community identity.

Introduction

1. Alan Weedon, "Melbourne's public housing coronavirus lockdown tells a story of two cities", *ABC*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-09/flemington-north-melbourne-public-housing-lockdown-two-cities/12431898>.

2. Renate Howe, *New Houses for Old; Fifty year of public housing in Victoria 1938-1988*, (Melbourne: Ministry of Housing and Construction, 1988), 21.

3. Howe, *New Houses for Old*, 21.

In response to the Covid-19 outbreak in July 2020, the low socio-economic migrant communities of nine public housing towers in Melbourne's inner-city were forced into hard lockdown, the residents confined within these high-rise, high-density tower blocks.¹ More than ever, attention has turned to these 20-30 storey housing towers built in the 1970s, with dated and inadequate ventilation systems, poorly ventilated communal spaces (corridors, staircases, laundries, elevators), and highly vulnerable residents. Reflecting on the origins of the towers has highlighted the disparity between the original idealised governmental intentions embedded in the towers and the architectural outcome that alienated residents, then and now. In 1968, when the Housing Commission, Victoria, (HCV) built the first of the forty-seven high rise towers in Melbourne's inner city suburbs they were representative of an exciting new building typology that would help cement "Modern" Melbourne on the world stage. They were part of a solution to a growing housing crisis in the city of Melbourne. The Housing Commission had been working toward solving this problem since the publication of the 1930s Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board Report, which resulted in the formation of the Housing Commission in 1937.² Spurred on by the "Modern" decisions and proposed actions of the HCV, Residential Associations organised protests and formed a movement to voice concerns over the demolition of the perceived slums, claiming that the proposed developments of the high rise towers did not respect the lives of the people, mainly migrants, who lived in these areas.³ The rise of the associations and the HCV actions that followed created a marked rift between the opposing sides and caused the inner-city suburbs of Melbourne to question, develop and articulate their ideals about community identity.

4. These interviews have been conducted as part of a social history project, that presents the "life and times" of Fitzroy from the 1950s onwards. As such, there is an even mix of migrant residents and "WASPs" who have been interviewed. It can be observed in the interviews, however that the "WASPs" have strong political memories of Fitzroy and the HCV, whereas the migrants recount the action of the HCV as simply something that happened, focusing instead on the meaning and value of their own homes, jobs, and social circles rather than the politics of the housing issues.

This paper re-examines the events and positions of the HCV and the Residential Associations, comparing their influences and intentions to determine the fundamental drive behind the call to action that both groups engendered. The historical review contextualises the vocal and well published positions of the Residential Associations and the HCV with reference to wider social circumstances. Specifically, it elaborates on the positions of each group. First, the paper investigates the perceptions of the HCV through a historical review of government papers and statements surrounding the social housing towers. Second, drawing on the existing work of historian Renate Howe and the work of the Fitzroy Historical Society's *Oral History Project*, it highlights the voices of displaced residents.⁴ The paper brings forward nuances within the positions, and re-evaluates the impact of the towers on Melbourne's inner urban fabric and the articulation of community identity.

"Marvellous Melbourne": Setting the Scene

5. David Islip, '1956 Olympic Decorations: The Final Fling', *Fabrications*, 11 no. 1, (2000): 29.

With the excitement of the impending 1956 Olympic Games, Melbourne began reimagining itself. The city became self-conscious and wondered what the world would think of a place that had been described as being "bland and British".⁵ Historian David Islip explains that in particular the American press saw Melbourne as a polite, boring city that, with the influence of post war immigration and the enthusiasm for the coming

6. Islip, '1956 Olympic Decorations', 29.

7. John Hughson, 'An Invitation to 'Modern' Melbourne: The Historical Significance of Richard Beck's Olympic Poster Design', *Journal of Design History*, 25 no. 3, (2012): 278

8. Hughson, 'An Invitation to 'Modern' Melbourne, 278.

9. J.P Gaskin and R. Burkitt, *Report on Some Aspects of Housing Overseas*, (Melbourne: Housing Commission Victoria, 1958), ii.

10. Gaskin and Burkitt, *Report on Some Aspects of Housing Overseas*, ii.

11. Gaskin and Burkitt, *Report on Some Aspects of Housing Overseas*, ii.

12. Gaskin and Burkitt, *Report on Some Aspects of Housing Overseas*, 164.

13. Gaskin and Burkitt, *Report on Some Aspects of Housing Overseas*, 164.

14. Gaskin and Burkitt, *Report on Some Aspects of Housing Overseas*, 191.

15. Gaskin and Burkitt, *Report on Some Aspects of Housing Overseas*, 37.

16. Hugh Stretton, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, (Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1970), 220

17. Philip Goad, 'Encyclopaedia of Australian Architecture' (Port Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 2012), 343

18. Victorian State Government, Housing Act 1958, Part 1, Article 5 Paragraph 1.

Olympics, could change into something more promising.⁶ The 1956 Olympic Games have become a significant marker in Melbourne's history – seen as the turning point between a British Melbourne, and a more modern city that turned to America for inspiration. Cultural studies scholar John Hughson claims that the Melbourne Olympics also provided a platform for modernists such as Frank Beaurepaire, previous Mayor of Melbourne and member of the Australian 1956 Olympic delegation, to experiment with new design ideas from across the world, even if only glimpsed through publications and architectural monuments.⁷ Hughson argues that "Beaurepaire saw hosting the Olympic games as an opportunity to enhance Melbourne's reputation as a cosmopolitan city for international business. He thus encouraged 'futuristic' development, which at the time, largely meant high-rise buildings."⁸

Concurrently, Melbourne was facing a worsening housing shortage which persuaded the Housing Commission to investigate housing in overseas countries.⁹ In developing solutions to the housing crisis that the HCV was battling, HCV employees Jack Gaskin and Ray Burkitt were sent on an international trip as part of an "investigation of housing matters in overseas countries."¹⁰ One of the three principal matters for Gaskin and Burkitt to examine was "the construction and management of Multi-storey flats."¹¹ Their report outlined the advantages and disadvantages they found in relation to multi-storey flats. They argued that "by incorporating one or more high-rise buildings in a layout that would otherwise consist only of row houses, walk-ups and maisonettes it is possible to achieve a more pleasing aesthetic development."¹² They also found that these high-rises create "more open space on the ground of gardens, etc."¹³ Overall they surmised that "In all overseas countries visited where slum reclamation or urban renewal schemes were being undertaken in the inner areas of large cities, the Housing Authorities have, without exception, adopted the same solution to the problem, namely, the erection of multi-storey flats."¹⁴ Gaskin and Burkitt returned to Melbourne in 1958 with proof of the positive effects of high rise developments internationally. Their findings spurred on the quest for modernisation which the Olympics had already started in the city.

The HCV's desire to adopt Modernist design principles through aesthetic and economic frameworks resulted in integrating large open spaces with garden areas around the high-rise towers, and the use of concrete, enabling economically viable buildings with low maintenance costs.¹⁵ As the efficiency of the design methods created large modernist high-rise beacons on the inner-city skyline, questions turned to their effects on the urban environment and the communities who lived there.¹⁶

Position 1: The Housing Commission, Victoria

Established in 1937¹⁷ the Housing Commission's objectives were "a) the improvement of existing housing conditions; and b) the provision of adequate and suitable houses for letting or leasing to persons who are displaced from reclamation areas or living under unsatisfactory housing conditions and to other eligible persons."¹⁸ The HCV was given powers to investigate and report poor living conditions around Melbourne with

19. Victorian State Government, Housing Act 1958, Part 1, Article 5 Paragraph 2.

20. Victorian State Government, Housing Act 1958, Part 1, Article 5 Paragraph 2.

21. Housing Commission Victoria, *Report of the Housing Commission Victoria for the Year ended 30 June 1980* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1981), 9

the consequential powers of “reclamation and re-planning insanitary housing”¹⁹ and “the condemnation and demolition of insanitary obstructive and other houses and buildings.”²⁰ They sought to “improv[e] existing housing by establishing and enforcing adequate housing standards.”²¹ In line with the findings from their investigation into housing solutions overseas, the HCV would adopt a modernist framework for this, maximising the number of people they could accommodate in the space available to them. The 1961 and 1966 HCV annual reports reflect the evolution of social housing designs, as the HCV developed technology to fulfil their desire for Modernist high-rise towers. The 1961 report documents the reasoning, success and excitement surrounding the building of the first and smaller high-rise tower, the 16-storey tower in South Melbourne. The 1966 annual report reveals the design process and construction of the 30 storey towers that would cause protests and residential anxiety in 1968. A comparison of these two reports allows the mapping and locating of key shifts in the HCV’s intentions as well as identifying the building development that occurred.

The Housing Commission, Victoria – the beginning of the High-Rise Movement

22. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Third Annual Report of the Housing Commission Victoria for the Period 1st of July, 1960 to 30th June 1961* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1961), 5.

23. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Third Annual Report*, 5.

24. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Third Annual Report*, 5.

25. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Third Annual Report*, 5.

26. Throughout the development of these plans there were a series of surveys conducted throughout the perceived slum areas, the first in 1937, detailing the slum conditions, and a series of follow up sample and suburbs specific studies done in 1938, 1939 and 1941 and 1943. These are detailed in Chapter 2 of Renate Howes’ *New Houses for Old*, 1988.

The annual report for 1961 details the construction and design of the 16-storey social housing tower and the surrounding ‘walk-up’ 4 storey flats in South Melbourne. Deemed “one of the most important works”²² that the commission had carried out, the HCV describes the benefit of this first tower and the surrounding walk-up flats as being able to house “some 800 persons compared with the 284 who lived in the same areas prior to the reclamation activity by the Commission.”²³ They indicate that these densities were necessary due to the rise in the cost of acquiring the land, and further that they are “contributing in a significant way to the arrest of the suburban sprawl with its inherent costs.”²⁴ The project at South Melbourne reflected the ideal housing scenario as described in the Report on Overseas Housing, combining the use of walk-up flats, with more ambitious 16-storey tower designs in the same area. It also captured the changing architectural ideals that the HCV were experimenting with. Previously walk-ups had been firmly established as a method of designing higher density living across the city. Now, with demand for accommodation “greatly exceeding the number of dwelling units the commission can build with its reduced finance,”²⁵ the proposed high rise towers provided a way of building and accommodating people whilst working within the budget constraints given to them by state and federal governments. The combination of these housing designs represented the implementation of the modernist ideals, creating spaces for families in the lower walk-up flats and providing accommodation for single people and couples without children in the towers.²⁶

Housing Commission, Victorian – High-Rises take over the Inner-City Suburbs

Between 1961 and 1966 the Housing Commission stretched the design for the social housing towers from 16 storeys to 30 and abandoned the walk-up flats altogether. The walk-ups were no longer

27. Stretton, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, 220.

28. Stretton, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, 220.

29. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Eighth Annual Report of the Housing Commission Victoria for the Period 1st of July, 1965 to 30th June 1966* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1966), 12.

30. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Eighth Annual Report*, 12.

31. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Eighth Annual Report*, 18.

32. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Eighth Annual Report*, 18.

33. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Eighth Annual Report*, 18.

34. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Eighth Annual Report*, 18.

35. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Eighth Annual Report*, 17.

36. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Eighth Annual Report*, 17.

37. Housing Commission Victoria, *Twenty Eighth Annual Report*, 8.

considered the success originally touted. In 1970, Australian historian Hugh Stretton wrote "They were discontinued after some independent researchers persuaded the commission to permit a thorough survey of their tenants experiences of them."²⁷ Stretton notes that the developments "combin[ed] high rise disadvantages with doubled walk-up disadvantages."²⁸ This left the HCV with high rise towers only - the modernist ideal - as their solution to the slum reclamation issue in the inner-city suburbs around Melbourne.

The HCV stated in the 1966 annual report that the highlight of their architectural work for the year had been "designing a 30-storey block of 299 flats to be erected at South Melbourne."²⁹ The Housing Commission wanted to be seen as "[i]ncorporating the latest ideas"³⁰ into their designs, thus realising the lessons they had learned overseas and implementing the designs in the Melbourne context. They were pleased to note that the high-rise towers that they had already constructed "compare[d] more than favourably with what has been done anywhere in Australia or overseas, particularly in the field of lone person accommodation, the standard of which is higher than has been seen elsewhere."³¹ The HCV was convinced that their construction was "superior to the pre-clearance standard"³² of the residential slums they had targeted, which directly correlated with the aims that the HCV developed in the 1958 Housing Act. Like the 1961 annual report, the HCV's statement reflected a strong conviction that these high-rise towers were a successful solution to the demand for housing and the limited funds available to them.³³ Subsequently however, the HCV acknowledged that there was a need to consider the effects of the high-rise towers on an urban scale, so that the HCV could "determine priorities for the whole of the inner suburbs."³⁴ They sought to ascertain what development was occurring across the whole of the inner suburbs, public and private. The report states that "any redevelopment should be part of a coherent overall redevelopment plan for whole areas, including the defined slum areas and adjacent lands."³⁵ They cite the growing need to consider where schools, recreational areas and other community services are in relation to the housing that is being built.³⁶ The development of the intentions as revealed in the 1966 report begins to show how the scope of works that they were attempting to complete was incrementally changing. It was no longer simply an issue of housing people, they became increasingly concerned with how the entire suburb was functioning. In the opening address of the 1966 report, the HCV argued that "consideration should be given to expanding the Commission's charter to meet the wider concept of urban renewal with a change of name to Housing and Urban Development Commission."³⁷

The work that the HCV completed across the 1960s shifted from modest low rise interventions to large scale tower developments in the space of six years. The HCV struggled to meet the demands they had set themselves, to reclaim the slums, to then rehome the displaced people in good accommodation, and to prevent Melbourne's urban sprawl. The "Modernist Ideals" that they had seen in practice overseas seemed to be the ideal design solution to these pressing issues.

Position 2: The Residential Associations

38. Laurie O'Brien, 'Oral History Project', Interviewed by the Fitzroy Historical Society, September 14, 2015, <https://oralhistory.fitzroyhistorysociety.org.au>.

The new housing works that the HCV was undertaking, particularly the demolition of large tracts of existing residential housing, increasingly came to the attention of the residents of the suburbs who lived there. Long term Fitzroy resident Laurie O'Brien recalls that "people were anxious, a lot of them were very anxious"³⁸ that the HCV was going to proclaim an area for demolition. O'Brien describes the process that the Housing Commission went through in detail, relating the threat to her own home:

39. O'Brien, Interview.

The Commission was obliged first to 'proclaim' a selected area and, sometime later, to serve householders in that area with a 'notice to treat', meaning that they were required to negotiate the sale of their property to the Commission... it was pretty frightening. Naturally we objected. You had the right to object.³⁹

40. Anne and Paul Coughlan, Oral History Project', Interviewed by the Fitzroy Historical Society, December 12, 2016, <https://oralhistory.fitzroyhistorysociety.org.au>.

The residents of the inner-city suburbs were living in conditions that the HCV deemed unacceptable: "The Housing Commission took a view that you could serve a notice on the basis that a house had an external toilet which wasn't something that most people would've worried about".⁴⁰ The residents felt that the HCV did not notice that the owners of the houses were doing their best to make the houses more liveable. Greek resident Sam Stasinopoulos remembers how he bought a "tumble down"⁴¹ house, with "broken windows, broken walls"⁴² and "fix[ed] the house"⁴³ and "buil[t] the kitchen".⁴⁴ Barry and Margaret Pullen recollected such actions, "we could see that there's these people who had bought their houses and spent their effort fixing them up, they were not going to be helped by their house being demolished".⁴⁵ Official government visits traumatised local residents. For example, O'Brien remembers having the Minister for Housing visit her house as part of an inspection for the exemption process:

41. Sam Stasinopoulos, Oral History Project, Interviewed by the Fitzroy Historical Society, May 25, 2016, <https://oralhistory.fitzroyhistorysociety.org.au>.

42. Stasinopoulos, Interview.

43. Stasinopoulos, Interview.

44. Stasinopoulos, Interview.

45. Barry and Margaret Pullen, Oral History Project', Interviewed by the Fitzroy Historical Society, May 30, 2016, <https://oralhistory.fitzroyhistorysociety.org.au>.

46. O'Brien, Interview.

Some parts of our house were in reasonable shape but other parts looked pretty raw. I remember that just before the ministerial visit rushing out and buying a cyclamen, God knows why a cyclamen, and putting it in a pot on the staircase windowsill, anything to distract the Minister from gazing at walls and floors.⁴⁶

47. O'Brien, Interview.

48. Tony and Mary Caroll, Oral History Project', Interviewed by the Fitzroy Historical Society, May 22, 2015, <https://oralhistory.fitzroyhistorysociety.org.au>.

Fortunately, the Minister's visit to their house was deemed a success, with the house being declared exempt from demolition. Those around her were not so lucky however, as O'Brien recounts, "The [government] were certainly practised at exerting pressure on householders if not at intimidating them."⁴⁷ Greek resident, Tony Caroll, remembers his step mother and father selling their house to the HCV when the first flats were built, recalling the move from one house to another, and the eventual decision as an adult to move to the outer suburb of Rosanna in the early 1970s.⁴⁸ As diverse communities were impacted by the HCV's actions, the newer, younger residents of the suburbs became more angered at the changes the HCV were forcing on these suburbs. There was an "acute feeling of outrage at the policy of displacing people."⁴⁹

49. Barry Pullen, *Inaugural Speech for Pullen*, Barry T. Hansard Volume: 365 Page: 1929, 29 June (1982)

A direct result of the distress caused by the HCV's actions, was the gradual formation of Residential Associations across Melbourne's inner-

50. Sam Marasco, Oral History Project, Interviewed by the Fitzroy Historical Society, May 6, 2016, <https://oralhistory.fitzroyhistorysociety.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/FHS-Sam-Marasco-2016.pdf>.

51. Marasco, Interview.

52. Pullen, Interview.

53. Pullen, Interview.

54. Renate Howe, David Nichols, Graeme Davison, *Trendyville, The Battle for Australia's Inner Cities*, (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2014), 11.

55. Howe, Nichols, Davison, *Trendyville*, xiii.

56. Marasco, Interview.

57. Howe, Nichols, Davison, *Trendyville*, 15.

city suburbs. These groups were formed by young couples new to these neighbourhoods. The new residents were concerned about the threat to the traditional culture built by migrants who were seeking to keep their own "customs"⁵⁰ alive here in Australia and the "community feel"⁵¹ this had created. Barry Pullen, an active group member, remembers, "we were the only WASPs [white Anglo-Saxon persons] we knew and what we remember distinctly is I could just about say the street, Greek, Greek, Greek, Italian, Italian, Italian, it was like that."⁵² Pullen also recounts the reasons for his involvement: "I wasn't motivated really by saving the houses then, I was about people."⁵³ The residential action groups invested in the "village, intimate, cooperative in spirit"⁵⁴ culture that characterised the places they inhabited; a culture developed by the migrants who established themselves there in the post war years.⁵⁵ As described by Italian migrant Sam Marasco "There's just sort of this camaraderie because it is a little town."⁵⁶ Pullen and his colleagues were looking to preserve and further develop a neighbourhood, cultivating a community influenced by "new ideals and the arrival of a new generation of university educated professionals, attuned to international, as well as Australian, movements"⁵⁷ and inclusive of the culture the migrants had created.

The Carlton Residents Association

58. Howe, Nichols, Davison, *Trendyville*, 73

59. Peter Yule, *Carlton: A History*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), 156

60. O'Brien, Interview.

61. Yule, *Carlton: A History*, 156

The Carlton Residents Association formed in 1969 after the amalgamation of the North and South Carlton Associations,⁵⁸ and reached its peak membership in 1972 with 2000 members.⁵⁹ By the end of the 1960s, the population of Carlton had changed and the influx of academics, intellectuals and rising house prices⁶⁰ saw more people developing a keen interest in the suburb, displacing the existing migrant communities that had dominated the area previously.⁶¹ O'Brien remembers the community:

62. O'Brien, Interview.

... attract[ing], from the beginning, a number of academics from the 'other side of town'... such as architects – David Saunders, Miles Lewis and George Tibbits as well as Frank Strahan, who was the University's chief archivist, all of whom lived either in Carlton or Parkville.⁶²

63. David Beauchamp in *Trendyville*, 73.

64. Howe, Nichols, Davison, *Trendyville*, 74.

65. Howe, Nichols, Davison, *Trendyville*, 75.

In the beginning, the North and South Carlton Associations did not have the same aims. The North Carlton Association, "intended to assist residents with many different issues... schools, social welfare, the environment and so on."⁶³ The South Carlton Association on the other hand, strongly influenced by demolitions in Sydney, desired to "mobilise the entire community"⁶⁴ against the proposed demolitions in Carlton. Within two years of the two groups amalgamating, the HCV proposed the demolition of the 'Lee Street Block' – which accounted for 80 hectares of housing - and the Melbourne Transportation Study proposed a new six lane highway which would cut the suburb in two.⁶⁵ Such significant demolition would effectively destroy the entire suburb, and any ideals that the residents had had in relation to building a community would be obliterated along with it.

Opposing the intended demolition of the Lee Street Block would be a significant milestone for the Carlton Association, as David Beauchamp recalls:

66. David Beauchamp, in *Trendyville*, 75.

We went and looked at the houses, and decided that they were certainly not slums; they were no different to many of the other houses in Carlton, including the houses that we were living in ourselves. So, a group of us lodged an objection to the Housing Commission on that slum clearance, which was rejected by the Housing Commission.⁶⁶

67. Howe, Nichols, Davison, *Trendyville*, 75.

68. Yule, *Carlton: A History*, 159.

69. Yule, *Carlton: A History*, 159.

70. Howe, Nichols, Davison, *Trendyville*, 78.

71. Howe, Nichols, Davison, *Trendyville*, 78.

In response, the Carlton Association decided to hold an open day, "when anyone in Melbourne could view the neatly and proudly kept homes of the Lee Street Block."⁶⁷ They effectively showed the wider population the conditions of the area, that "the residents were certainly not debauched, immoral, unclean, receivers of charity, purposely unemployed or criminal"⁶⁸ and "thousands of visitors from across Melbourne agreed that 'These are not slums!'"⁶⁹ These protests by the Carlton Association were typical of the Residential Associations at the time, characterised as "paper warfare rather than street demonstrations"⁷⁰ However, the scale of the actions of the Carlton group, the strong mix of academic opinions, and the large percentage of people prepared to stand up for what they believed in, meant that this was not always the case. The Carlton Association were one of the first groups to hold a significant demonstration, at which an effigy of Ray Meagher, the State Housing Minister, was burned.⁷¹ The extreme lengths to which the residents went to preserve the ideals of their community would be shown en masse through large radical demonstrations.

The Fitzroy Residents Association

72. Howe, Nichols, Davison, *Trendyville*, 47.

73. O'Brien, Interview.

Unlike Carlton, Fitzroy was known as a "notorious slum"⁷² throughout the 1950s, and therefore high on the HCV's agenda for reclamation and rehousing. By the mid 1960s the HCV had already demolished and rebuilt large tracts of this inner-city suburb. These actions replaced the existing "narrows" with "walk-up flats and eight two storey row houses (then called maisonettes)."⁷³ Despite these long-term developments, the Resident Association there was not immediately concerned with housing demolition, but like the North Carlton Group, was concerned with smaller neighbourhood issues. As Anne Coughlan explains:

74. Coughlan, Interview.

Things like parking, pointing out that you had schoolyards around inner Melbourne filled up with teachers' cars parked in them rather than being used... the alteration of the houses, to try and preserve the Victorian character when [people] would quite like to remove the windows and put bigger windows in the front and do all of that.⁷⁴

This smaller local agenda of the Fitzroy Residents' Association manifested as a series of motions directed at the local council:

75. Coughlan, Interview.

So, we battled on a bit and we'd move various motions about trying to get things done, directed to the caucus, and nothing would ever happen. I mean they'd just get filed. You could not move a motion that was binding on the members of the caucus in any event. But anyway, we moved various things and then thought we're not going to achieve very much if we don't get elected onto the Council.⁷⁵

76. Couhglan, Interview.

By 1972, to achieve the goals of the Residents' Association, a number of members were elected to the local council, where they "altered a lot things in the council framework."⁷⁶ Perhaps most significantly was their united opposition to the HCV, or in their own words "declaring war," as they faced the rising numbers of towers being built in their neighbourhood. Their position was clear:

77. Couhglan, Interview.

We thought block clearance wasn't the way to go. You must be able to preserve these houses and we demonstrated that by looking at a number of little individual houses they'd tried to condemn. If people spent a bit of money on them they were perfectly good houses for people to live in.⁷⁷

The Fitzroy Residents' Association quickly found themselves in a similar position to the Carlton Association, trying to protect a large housing area against a government body. Like the Carlton Association, the Fitzroy Association would develop a paper protest strategy, using documentation, lawsuits and publications, to build support against the HCV. A key part of this was the publication, *Brooks Crescent: A Study of current slum reclamation procedures of the Housing Commission of Victoria*, which would draw heavily on information gathered by local association member Alan Jordan. Pullen recounts Jordan's involvement:

78. Pullen, Interview.

[Jordan] designed some questionnaires that we did with the people at Brookes Crescent. We went around and talked to people about how they felt about losing their houses and so on. They were very strongly opposed to it and we held public meetings and so on and people expressed very strong opposition.⁷⁸

79. Howe, Nichols, Davison, *Trendyville*, 102.

Such an account provides insight into the strength of paper protests characterised by intense and comprehensive documentation processes as instigated by the Residential Association, it also captures the way in which the various demographic and ethnic groups had their opinions gathered and recorded by the Residents Association. The questionnaires were complemented with photographs, portraying the state of the houses. The resulting report *Brooks Crescent* was presented to the HCV and the courts. The Fitzroy Residents' Association eventually won the 'Battle of Brookes Crescent'⁷⁹ through a combination of paper protests, documentation and street demonstrations. Subsequently the area was marked for infill development and the high-rise towers were stopped across the city.

Beyond the Debate

The heated debates between the Housing Commission and residents in Melbourne in the 1960s, not only highlighted the opposing ideals of the HCV and the Residential Associations but showcased the important role of community in designing neighbourhoods, and put the spotlight on the international sources each group drew on. The HCV sent its people overseas to conduct a 'global' search, whereas the Residential Associations found their ideals in contemporary publications. The result of this was the creation of new architectural styles in Melbourne and retention of existing housing that acted as icons that represented the desired community identities for each group.

80. Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities, The failure of Town Planning*, (Victoria: Penguin Books, 1964), 1.

For the residential activist groups, Jane Jacobs 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was a strong influence. Jacobs' book was an "attack on current city planning and rebuilding,"⁸⁰ as she championed the street, the sense of community and the importance of self-governance enabled through good design. In his 1970s book, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, Hugh Stretton remarks,

81. Stretton, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, 217.

The book [Death and Life of the Great American City] is the bible of the Carlton and Richmond intellectuals who read claret-stained copies of it (sometimes, I do hope, by the light candles stuck in bottles) in their refurbished terrace houses under the long shadow of the Housing Commission towers.⁸¹

82. Renate Howe, *MTalks – Parlour Presents 'Woman Transforming the City' Interview by Parlour*, October 15, 2015, <https://library.mpavilion.org/mtalks-parlour-presents-women-transforming-the-city/>.

Many years later, Renate Howe additionally reflected that Jacobs' ideas were undoubtedly a strong influence on the Residential Associations, providing them with an ideological platform from which to build their own solutions to the slums in their suburbs.⁸² For the Fitzroy Association the battle for the preservation of the blocks would be remembered by the activists as "about the people"⁸³ rather than the preservation of heritage and architecture. The changing demographics of these inner-city areas, from largely migrant communities to communities dominated by academics and intellectuals, embedded new ideas that were emerging overseas into the rhetoric of the Residential Associations. For them, the architecture of the 'narrows', became a means of creating a future that retained and celebrated their identity, and so they aligned themselves with Jacob's position.

83. Pullen, Interview.

Alternatively, the HCV found that the towers were a way of projecting a new forward-thinking, internationally-influenced identity onto the inner-city suburbs. The findings from the international research by the HCV marked a significant moment in Melbourne's search for new architecture, materiality and construction methods. For the HCV, the towers were icons of the future, of efficiency in housing many people without the need of endless suburban sprawl around the outskirts of the city. As historian Bree Carlton describes,

84. Bree Carlton, "Machine Living;" *The Discourses and Ideologies of Spatial Order which informed the high-rise developments of the Housing Commission Victoria 1950-1970*, *Melbourne Historical Journal*, 27, (1999):101.

Into the 1970s, the Commission estate towers dominated Melbourne's skyline as architectural monuments to the modernist urban landscape. In 1966, upon the completion of the South Melbourne thirty storey block 'Park Towers', the Commission received international acclaim for their technologically advanced construction methods and architectural forms and during this peak in construction and acclaim, the towers became symbols of modern material progress.⁸⁴

85. Islip, '1956 Olympic Decorations', 29.

As Carlton states, the modern city that the HCV desired to create was intrinsically linked to the style of architecture it chose for the residential towers. This fitted with international perceptions of what was 'modern' and aligned with the same goals that the city had established when seeking to host the Olympic games: to become the 'promising' city that the American press had envisaged for Melbourne.⁸⁵ Despite its emphasis on the future through the tower designs and the strong worldly ideals these embodied, the HCV would be strongly criticised by the residents for its inability to focus on the present and the people it was displacing through its vast demolition schemes.

In spite of the stand-off between the Housing Commission and the Residential Associations, the long-term outcome of the slum reclamation and rehousing project in the form of the high-rise towers, showcases architecture as an expressive medium through which to discover shared ideals and opposing positions which shape inner urban communities and their identities.

Beyond the drama of the heated debate, the paper proposes that the opposing positions of the Housing Commission and the Residential Associations are not mutually exclusive, but rather, are interrelated and informed by each other. Such a notion is important because it operates on two levels: first, it expands our understanding of how architecture can stimulate a broader public discussion and engagement with the political and social issues arising from the growth of metropolitan cities such as Melbourne, with respect to housing shortages and urban sprawl. And second, it reinforces the potential power of academic debates and activist battles as necessary public exchanges that not only have political and social implications, but significantly contribute to the shaping of localised, often less visible community identities.

Afterword

The present state of the Housing Commission high-rise towers supports the paper's contention that architecture plays a significant role in community identity and social value beyond the two polarising positions held by the HCV and the resident associations in the 1960s. The high-rise Housing Commission towers continue to have real and perceived impacts on urban living in inner city Melbourne.

86. Bianca Hall, 'Iconic': Residents seek heritage listing for Fitzroy high-rise housing estate, *The Age*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/bid-to-make-fitzroy-high-rise-housing-estate-a-site-of-heritage-significance-20200623-p555cu.html>.

87. Bianca Hall, "'Iconic': Residents seek heritage listing for Fitzroy high-rise housing estate".

88. Bianca Hall, "'Iconic': Residents seek heritage listing for Fitzroy high-rise housing estate".

89. Margaret Fitzherbert, High Rise estate finally in the spotlight after years of Neglect, *The Age*, December 22, 2018, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/high-rise-estate-finally-in-the-spotlight-after-years-of-neglect-20181220-p50nhc.html>.

90. Alan Weedon, Melbourne's tower lockdowns reveal the precarious future of Victorian public housing, *ABC*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-17/melbourne-victoria-public-housing-social-mix-redevelopment/12459870>.

91. Alan Weedon, "Melbourne's tower lockdowns reveal the precarious future of Victorian public housing".

Today the residents of Atherton Gardens Estate in Fitzroy are seeking a Heritage Victoria listing on their towers, attributing the iconic image of the towers and landscaping around them as key features behind their reasoning for significance.⁸⁶ They claim the development has now created its own vibrant community, which is an important part of the suburb as a whole.⁸⁷ Not only do the towers here demonstrate an example of successful 1960s housing design in Australia, they also represent a period of disconnect in Melbourne's history, which should be remembered.⁸⁸ However, not all of the Housing Commissions High-Rise towers have the same positive community representations found at Atherton Gardens. In contrast, the South Melbourne Towers have regularly made news headlines for the squalor and violence that occurs in the Park Tower and at Emerald Hill Court.⁸⁹ Most recently during the 2020 Melbourne Coronavirus lock down, 9 towers across North Melbourne and Flemington were put into lock down, due to the high risk of the virus spreading through the communal areas, such as the shared laundries and corridors.⁹⁰ The tower residents here are not described as a cohesive 'community' as at Atherton Gardens. Instead articles demonstrate how these communities are stigmatised; that the towers themselves are associated with poor maintenance and a lack of government interest in increasing the habitability of accommodation.⁹¹ Here the ideals of the HCV seem to have been undermined. The desires for modern facilities and adequate open space have been swept aside by economic imperatives alone.