

Co-housing because everyone needs good neighbours

Living Sharing housing is growing in appeal as rising prices force resource sharing.

Su-Lin Tan

The “broken Australian housing model” has pushed some Melburnians to start their own housing project, an initiative that has led to conversations with property developer Lendlease.

Urban Coup, a community initiative made up of 30 households ranging from first home buyers to young families, wants to buy land in a 5 to 8 kilometre radius of Melbourne and build a four to six-storey “co-housing” apartment building for all 30 families.

“The market is pricing us out,” the group’s treasurer Alex Fearnside said.

“And a lot of people have memories of multi-generational households, taking a meal around to people who are unwell or even celebrating Easter together ... none of the developments give us the social cohesion we want.”

Living in “dormitories with common living areas” with a ground-floor supermarket could be a solution to Sydney and Melbourne’s affordability issue, design consultancy Arup’s global director Chris Luebke said.

Dr Luebke said savings in housing is the bottom line for such micro-housing or co-housing projects, but more importantly, interacting or relying on neighbours, is starting to appeal, particularly to millennials and retired Baby Boomers.

Co-housing, a luxurious version of the “shared house”, is about accommodating many small dwellings in a shared property. The aim is to provide affordable housing; reduce the environmental footprint of a household; and create a community. Unlike with housemates though, co-housers enjoy privacy and independence. It has worked well in Europe and Boston, where “compact city living” are well accepted, but in Australia, the idea is often met with bewilderment.

“We see housing as a major investment opportunity not as basic human right for shelter,” UNSW’s professor of urban science Chris Pettit said.

“Cities have been dominated by low-



Interacting with neighbours, even relying on them, is starting to appeal to Australians. PHOTO: ANDREW WUTTKE

density living and changing this mindset is not easy, particularly when the transition to higher-density living has not been done well.”

There are only four known co-housing projects in Australia – in Melbourne, Perth and Fremantle, Cohousing Australia chairwoman and DesignInc Melbourne architect, Heidi Lee, said. Projects in the pipeline include Urban Coup’s project and Co-West and Banyule, in Melbourne. In Frankston, eight households are building a co-housing project, “The Digs”.

Ms Lee lives in a rental co-housing development – Murundaka in Melbourne’s Heidelberg. She leases a self-contained apartment. The 300 sq m of common dining and living areas she shares cuts living costs by 25 per cent.

“Lifestyle affordability is key ... I can rent my car out, share libraries, even lend tools out. We bulk purchase cleaning consumables,” she said.

Co-houses are not necessarily “dirt cheap” but it is the long-term or lifestyle affordability that creates the savings, Breathe Architecture’s Jeremy

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Heidi Lee, Cohousing Australia

McLeod said. Mr McLeod’s sustainable apartment project The Commons in Melbourne’s Brunswick is similar to co-housing and saves on power as it is thermal efficient – it warms and cools better than average apartment blocks.

The building offers a common garden and laundry and zero car spaces – and while not necessarily cheaper than Melbourne, it is friendlier because it has low balcony walls for neighbourly interactions. The train station is next door.

The Urban Coup group wants similar strata-titled units, but will trade in the bedroom ensuite for environmental efficiency. The group is saying

no to expensive benchtops but yes to a large common kitchen. There will be less than one parking space a unit.

They are looking to pay between \$450,000 for a one-bedroom home to \$720,000 for a three-bedroom unit somewhere in inner-city Melbourne.

If the group can find the right 1000 sq m site – the hardest part of the project – their building will be the first high-rise co-house in Australia.

They are prepared to share financial risks with the developer but funding is another problem for co-housing.

“Many banks require housing projects to have one-third in equity ... not many groups can raise this. Ideally their deposits could be used as equity, but banks don’t recognise this,” Mr McLeod said.

“There needs to be a paradigm shift from the Australian obsession that the home is an investment.” And because housing is often built for the investor, housing projects in Australia are not done well, Mr Pettit said. “Suburbs get built with the promises of bus or train services that do not eventuate.”