



Australian
Institute of
Architects

INDIGENOUS HOUSING (2008)

Summary

The Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) supports the urgent need to improve the poor standard of housing for Indigenous people across Australia in urban, rural and remote areas.

The standard of housing and essential infrastructure available to Indigenous communities is well below that which is generally available to the non-Indigenous population. There is clear evidence that the failure of governments to provide a reasonable standard of housing design, construction and maintenance has direct and immediate consequences for the health and well-being of Indigenous people. The inadequate supply of housing, which leads to overcrowding, aggravates these problems.

Governments must build more housing for Indigenous communities and design it better to suit their cultural and physical needs. Existing stock must be better maintained and new dwellings designed and built for lower maintenance. Architects, working with other stakeholders can make a significant contribution to improving Indigenous housing.

Background

The majority of housing for Indigenous communities is in poor condition. Evidence shows the prime causes are poor initial construction exacerbated by a lack of regular routine maintenance.¹

The Institute has determined that government policies over the past 40 years aimed at reducing the short-term capital cost of houses at the expense of reasonable housing standards have increased running and maintenance costs for residents and lead to premature housing failure. Policies that mandate high quality initial construction and regular routine maintenance are required to prevent these circumstances from recurring. In addition, there is an acute shortage of housing for Indigenous communities which leads to overcrowding and places further strain on household infrastructure, particularly health hardware such as toilets and showers. This has direct and immediate negative consequences for the health and well-being of Indigenous people.²

The Institute believes that architects have an important role to play in improving the standard of Indigenous housing. Architects have a unique set of skills to work with Indigenous communities, particularly in remote communities. Architects produce housing that is appropriate to particular cultural practices and relationships, and the demands of geography and climate.

¹ Department of Family and Community Services, 2003, National Indigenous Housing Guide, 2nd Ed., Canberra

² SGS Economics & Planning in conjunction with Tallegalla Consultants, 2006, Evaluation of Fixing Houses for Better Health Projects 2, 3 and 4. Dept. of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra. Occasional Paper No.14. 2006.

The involvement of experienced architects, in collaboration with other stakeholders is vital if the quality, suitability and longevity of housing for Indigenous communities are to be improved.

What Governments need to do

A high priority must be placed on addressing this national housing backlog in urban, rural and remote populations.

Because adequate and appropriate housing is fundamental for the development of stable, secure and socially cohesive indigenous communities, which can in turn foster the economic development and prosperity needed for sustainable communities, the Institute calls on the Government departments and agencies involved urgently to do the following:

- **Build more houses:** The shortage in appropriate housing, particularly for Indigenous communities in remote areas, must be addressed. Housing shortages lead to overcrowding which in turn exacerbates problems caused by inadequate health hardware and a lack of regular maintenance. Governments must undertake to provide the funds necessary to clear the backlog.
- **Design better houses:** New housing for Indigenous communities is to be appropriately designed for the traditional and cultural practices of the occupants and their communities and for particular geographical and climatic conditions. Housing for Indigenous communities must be designed and built to ensure ease of maintenance, low running costs for residents and longevity.
- **Keep houses working** High quality initial design and construction needs to be combined with regular programmed maintenance if the quality of housing for Indigenous communities is to improve. Regular maintenance for existing housing has also been shown to be effective in improving the way houses function. Adequate funding is to be provided for such maintenance.
- **Employ local people and organisations** It is vital to build and maintain the capacity of Indigenous communities to manage their own housing and essential infrastructure. Many Indigenous organisations have demonstrated a capacity to deliver and maintain housing services through constantly changing policy regimes. These Indigenous organisations can be even more effective if provided with adequate government support.

Task Force Report

Background

In 2006, the Australian Institute of Architects established an Indigenous Housing Taskforce. The terms of reference of the Indigenous Housing Task Force were to develop a policy for the Institute, consolidate current information on best practice with respect to housing design, practice and research, and to create a framework for delivering positive change in housing outcomes through appropriate partnerships with Government.

The Indigenous Housing Taskforce was established under the leadership of the 2006 Institute President Carey Lyon who is also a member of the Taskforce, as are Col James, Alex Ackfun, James Bray, Julian Wigley, Dillon Kombumerrie, Andrew Lane, Carroll Go- Sam, Geoff Barker, Paul Pholeros, Gillian Barlow and David Donald, with Paul Memmott as Taskforce Chairperson.

Conclusions

The Institute supports the urgent need to improve the poor standard of housing for Indigenous people across Australia in urban, rural and remote areas.

There is clear evidence that the combined processes of all Australian governments, agencies and professional groups have failed to deliver reasonable housing design, construction or maintenance and that this has had direct and immediate consequences for the health and well-being of Indigenous people.³

Despite the majority of Indigenous housing being overcrowded and old, clear consistent evidence also shows that the prime causes of housing failure to deliver benefit are largely not the fault of the residents through misuse or vandalism, but rather the result of poor initial construction or lack of regular, routine maintenance that would be required in any Australian home.⁴

The Institute calls on government policy-makers and planners to recognise that the provision of adequate and appropriate housing in Indigenous communities plays a crucial role in developing and maintaining healthy communities and a high quality of lifestyle for residents. Adequate and appropriate housing is essential for stable, secure and socially cohesive environments to develop.

³ SGS Economics & Planning in conjunction with Tallegalla Consultants, *Evaluation of Fixing Houses for Better Health Projects 2, 3 and 4*. Dept. of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra. Occasional Paper No.14. 2006.

⁴ Aust., Department of Family and Community Services 2003 *National Indigenous Housing Guide* [2nd edition], Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

This in turn can foster economic development and the prosperity needed for sustainable environments. To ensure that the housing management capacities of Indigenous communities are achieved, assistance is needed with training, governance, policing, equitable access to service delivery and professional support. All housing projects should be tied to funded social support programs.

All Governments should have policies that fund the following:

- *Building more houses:* The Institute calls on all levels of government in Australia to reduce the national housing backlog which has existed since the 1967 Referendum when the constitutional impediment to the Commonwealth government making special laws with respect to Aborigines was removed. This backlog needs to be reduced in metropolitan, urban and rural populations as well as remote locations.
- *Building better houses:* The Institute is highly critical of the cycle demonstrated over the last 40 years, 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 housing failure. This in turn leads again to a demand for higher housing standards and increased costs.
- *Keeping houses working:* High quality initial construction and regular routine maintenance is required (as in any Australian home) to prevent house failure.
- *Local people employed to keep houses working:* Governments should assist in building up and maintaining the capacity of Indigenous communities to manage their own (community) social housing and essential infrastructure.
- *Local organisations developed and supported to keep houses working:* There has also been a lack of adequate support for those Indigenous organisations which have demonstrated the ability to deliver and maintain housing services through constantly changing government policy regimes over the last 40 years.

Planning Policies in relation to Indigenous housing and settlement

- The rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to live on their country, need to be recognised within a framework of traditional connection, links to sacred sites and Dreaming lines and the practices of customary law. Indigenous communities who are committed to their place of residence and culturally distinct lifestyle need to be respected and supported. For such communities, new or growing remote economies need continuing support.
- Indigenous settlements (remote, urban and metropolitan) require planning for change, growth

and cultural needs, with respect to land use needs, zoning and town boundaries. Indigenous land use needs include culturally-specific spatial and place-based needs as well as economic needs, and should also recognise the strong attachments of many Indigenous groups to remote cultural landscapes.

- Recognition should be made of the vital role played by remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their residents in maintaining Australia's national security. These communities are often located in the most isolated areas of Australia, and are on the frontline in combating the threat from foreign pests, weeds and exotic species that endanger Australia's environment, its pastoral and agricultural industries. Continuing support of remote communities to further develop and expand a range of land management, sea-management and bio-diversity maintenance activities is of national importance.

Housing Delivery and Management Policies for Indigenous Settlements

Historically there has been a lack of continuity in the delivery of housing, essential services (power, water and waste), community support structures and the necessary economic opportunities in Indigenous communities, to achieve improved and adequately sustained living conditions, as well as the environmental health and well-being of Indigenous people.

Policies need to ensure that houses are built where people need to live. A far too-often occurrence exists of housing built in locations that meets agency requirements (minimise capital costs, existing infrastructure locations, using existing outmoded subdivisions), rather than meeting community development and land-use requirements and household preferences. Essential services provided to houses must be suitable for the location, be affordable and able to be maintained.

The delivery of new housing needs to be supported with local house maintenance training and skills development and housing management systems at the local level.

Home ownership or security of tenure through long-term leasing options of communal Indigenous land should be made available to residents. For example, those residents who are able to enter into home ownership with all its responsibilities should have this choice without it being imposed upon them. Those residents who simply desire the security of a domestic occupancy through a long-term leasing option should have the certainty of a tenancy agreement that complies with the residential tenancy legislation in their particular jurisdiction. The option of succession of tenancies should be made available to residents who have a particular family connection to a residence and require a longitudinal security of tenure from generation to generation.

Governments should assist to build up and maintain the capacity of communities to manage and maintain (community) public housing by:

- Ensuring tenancy management systems for public housing recognise variations of need across communities and that access to rental housing and tenant support is equitable.
- Ensuring management procedures recognise local Indigenous mores and manners.
- Supporting community housing management offices, with respect to staffing, clear job descriptions, authority lines to “sign-off” work, and clear reporting procedures.
- Committing resources to adult education and skills training.
- Helping local people with skills stay within communities/and or regions, eg through career paths, maintaining facilities with functioning equipment, and staffing support (pay and assistance).
- Mainstreaming housing approaches need to avoid indirect discrimination practices (i.e. need to recognise specific cultural practices).

Education Policies for those involved in Indigenous housing and settlement

- Mandatory curriculum content on Indigenous cultural awareness is to be encouraged in all accredited tertiary architectural, building and planning courses, including on such topics as contact history, discrimination, cultural change, socio-economic implications of poverty and disadvantage and the history of poor housing delivery and its causes over the last 50 years.
- Government employees working in the Indigenous housing sector should undergo a program of awareness on the history of Indigenous housing to understand the extent of complexity of the topic as well as past successes and failures in policy, practice and delivery.
- Continuing professional development is necessary for architects involved in housing projects to improve house planning and function, to ensure houses are constructed properly including in rural and remote locations and to understand how to achieve reduced running and maintenance costs.