

In their pursuit of excellent design in the name of sustainability and social good, the Nightingale developments are exemplars of architect-led contemporary architecture.

Intelligent design



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I'm sitting in a small apartment in Nightingale Village, surely Australia's most-anticipated and most-discussed urban housing development of the past decade. With me is Cam, who's telling me what it's like to live in a *Teilhaus* - German for "part house" - otherwise known as a micro or studio apartment.

To my right is the built-in bed alcove, screened from the main space with a curtain. Straight ahead, Cam is buzzing about the kitchen making a cup of tea, while to my left is the lounge, with a large window onto a south-facing balcony. The apartment is light and warm, given the frigid Melbourne wind outside, and cosy both in its tiny size - around 35 square metres - and its rich timber materiality. It's also appealingly monastic: a small world of its own. I'm thinking idly of Albrecht Dürer's *Saint Jerome in His Study* when Cam articulates it for me: in such a dwelling, he says, "life is less complicated... It's small and it's *enough*".

Cam lives in Nightingale Evergreen, designed by Clare Cousins Architects, one of the six apartment buildings in the largest and most ambitious Nightingale development so far. Located on Wurundjeri country in Melbourne's Brunswick, immediately adjoining the Upfield railway line and its adjacent bike-superhighway, the Village joins an enclave of Nightingale projects. First was The Commons,

the 2013 project that acted as proof and prototype, and Nightingale 1 (2016), which set the agenda: architect-led medium density multi-residential developments, built on a not-for-profit basis, in pursuit of the triple-bottom-line of social and environmental benefit alongside economic sustainability.

In Australia, the funding and procurement of housing sits on a spectrum. On one side is social housing, a term encompassing both "pure" public housing owned and run by the state, and community housing operated by specialist non-profit housing organisations, often serving people with particular needs. On the other side is speculative private investment, which currently dominates the market. But as urbanist Andy Fergus has argued, between these two poles are many other, lesser-known models - the Baugruppe and co-op housing approaches common in Europe, for example, and closer to home, our very own ethical housing movement in approaches such as Assemble Communities, with its "build-to-rent-to-own" approach, and Nightingale.

It all began when Jeremy McLeod, founding director of Breathe Architecture, met with a group of fellow architects to consider how they could intervene in the housing market, and lift the standard of multi-residential housing. Their answer was to move from the design of *buildings* to the design of a financial *model*. Funded by impact investors often including the architects themselves, the model aims to produce housing that is sold at cost, by ballot, with capped profits on resale, to a list of pre-registered owner-occupier

buyers. It offers high quality, community-oriented housing, which importantly doesn't take existing public housing and "revitalise" it out of public hands.

Nightingale 1 began the series, with a building of 20 apartments pursuing the highest standards of environmental performance, enabled by a philosophy of "reductionism". Elements that unnecessarily pushed up construction cost and embodied carbon were summarily removed, including second bathrooms, air-conditioning, individual laundries and - controversially - onsite car parking, argued to be unnecessary given the site's excellent public transport links.

In the subsequent Nightingales the pattern continues. At the Village, the environmental measures take a larger scale, with 203 apartments across the six buildings. As a fossil-fuel free development, it harvests and re-uses 40,000 litres of rainwater, and has a substantial rooftop solar array and exceptionally high-performance thermal insulation and glazing that limits energy required for heating and cooling. It operates on collective, bulk-purchased green power that substantially reduces energy costs. It still relies on car and cargo bike sharing to encourage residents into green transport and has no internal laundries - instead, each building has a well-appointed communal laundry and washing lines on the roof.

Nightingale is predicated on a set of design principles: it is silent on the question of aesthetics. The Village is particularly fascinating for the expression, variation and

moments of delight that the six architects retained within some pretty intense constraints. Leftfield by Kennedy Nolan, for instance, has that practice's characteristic restrained geometrical elegance and sophisticated use of colour, especially on the interior, creating a deceptively sumptuous feel in the one-bedroom apartment I visited.

Evergreen is the smallest of the buildings, spare and disciplined, benefiting enormously from its frontage to the open space of Bulleke-bek Park to the north. Along with a glorious double-sized adjoining light well, it shares this northern edge with Austin Maynard Architects' ParkLife, which displays that practice's familiar exuberance in asymmetrical balcony profiles, wire mesh "balustrades" and splashes of bright yellow. On its roof is one of the standout gestures of the Village: a bank of "auditorium" garden seating, facing the sky, which cleverly resolves planning requirements for a stepped setback to the south. Hayball's CRT+YRD is distinguished by its eponymous central courtyard, acting as garden, light well, circulation and community meeting place, while Breathe's Skye House, the biggest of the buildings, has the unfussy sobriety of tight planning and quality materials assembled into a highly functional whole.

Urban Coup to the south is the odd one out, being based on a different model. Built for a preformed housing cooperative of some 14 years' standing, collaborators Breathe and Architecture architecture co-designed with co-op members to create a vertical community with shared facilities including a large communal cooking and dining space and

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Nightingale Evergreen and ParkLife in Brunswick, Melbourne (left), Hayball's CRT+YRD provides community space (right). Tom Ross

plans for a future Japanese bathhouse.

Any project that sets itself up as an exemplar is going to attract critical attention. Nightingale Village has been widely feted – winning big at the 2023 Victorian Architecture Awards across a range of categories from sustainability to multi-residential to urban design. But some argue the apartments are not “affordable” at all; that many residents have a dirty-secret car stashed somewhere off-site; that the community is a cultish middle-class smug-fest straight out of *Stuff White People Like*; that the Teilhaus apartments are inhumanly small “slums of the future”; and more recently, that the Nightingale entity has been coopted and carried away by the power of its own brand, to the extent it’s now just a greenwashed conventional developer.

It’s true the apartments are only *relatively* affordable: nothing in Melbourne is truly affordable. Even when sold at cost, costs themselves are high, and when the quality and environmental specifications are exacting, then the outcome is not going to be as cheap as a high-rise hotbox faced with flammable cladding might be.

The Nightingale Village is reportedly the first time a private developer has ever voluntarily engaged in “inclusionary zoning”, choosing to allocate 27 apartments to social and affordable housing providers. It is “tenure blind” – that is, the social housing is indistinguishable from privately held dwellings. Some say making inclusionary zoning mandatory for all private developments is the key to addressing the housing crisis. Clare Cousins, for example,

thinks “it’s the only way we’re going to get there”.

This is not necessarily popular among developers. In the past developers have often been distrustful of architects – while the people they *have* tended to trust are real estate agents. This has led the development pipeline – including detailed apartment design – to be predicated on what has sold before. Lenders, too, are wary of loaning money on untested ideas. The system has been bogged in inertia, braced against innovation.

Nightingale has been able to jump these tracks by recasting architects as developers, enabling them to build demonstration projects which raise the bar for the market as a whole. It has proven people will hang their undies on a communal clothesline, they do care about minimising the environmental harm of building, they’re not fussed by the lack of a second bathroom, or by sharing a building with social housing tenants. More than this, it shows they might actively subscribe to such values – that the social and environmental agenda might become a powerful brand in its own right, as indeed it has.

As McLeod says, the challenge for architects has always been to scale up from single boutique buildings, to find ways to “take back agency to shape the city”. Nightingale shows that through design ingenuity and sheer doggedness, when housing is framed as an essential service and social infrastructure rather than a vehicle for speculative profit, things can change. Nightingale Village is a landmark in the realisation of this vision. ●

ARTS DIARY

CULTURE	<i>Desert Mob</i> Venues throughout Mparntwe/Alice Springs, September 7–October 22
OPERA	<i>Hamlet</i> Her Majesty’s Theatre, Karna Country/ Adelaide, September 7-16
DANCE	<i>echoes of VAN GOGH</i> His Majesty’s Theatre, Whadjuk Noongar Country/Perth, September 8-23
CULTURE	Sydney Contemporary 2023 Carriageworks, Gadigal Country/Sydney, September 7-10
THEATRE	<i>Liminal</i> Peacock Theatre, nipaluna/Hobart, September 8-16

LAST CHANCE

VISUAL ART	The Affordable Art Fair Royal Exhibition Building, Naarm/ Melbourne, until September 3
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