

## Parliament of Victoria Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee

### Inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers

30<sup>th</sup> March 2025

For over 50 years Melbourne's High Rise Public Housing Towers have been a very powerful symbol to the people of Victoria and beyond, that our State has the grace and capacity to look after people.

The Victorian Housing Commission undertook construction of Melbourne's 44 Public Housing Towers primarily in the 1960's, to provide cost effective and numerous homes, to address urban sprawl, revitalize central city areas and to lift many Victorian citizens out of housing poverty and potential homelessness.

In 2025, it is arguable that Melbourne is once again required to address the same issues that it faced before the construction of the 44 Housing Towers. That is, revitalisation of the city, urban sprawl, housing poverty and homelessness, and escalating building costs.

Rather than blanket demolition of the 44 Towers, an alternative approach to retain and renovate the homes and Towers should be considered as a progressive opportunity for Melbourne to champion its identity as the caring State of Australia.

The renovation of similar High Rise Public Housing Tower buildings is not without precedent. The design of the Towers was inspired by the Architect le Corbusier's modernist housing design and Housing Towers like the existing Towers in Melbourne are built across Europe and beyond.

The floor plans and construction methodology for every Modernist Housing Tower have great similarities. This fact, dictates that, if successful precedents exist for renovation, then Melbourne can achieve the same successfully or with, arguably, greater success.

Three examples of successful Modernist Housing Tower renovations are referred to below: -

1. Cite du Lignon in Geneva, Switzerland by the architects Jaccaud and Associates
2. Rozemaai Housing, Antwerp, Belgium, by the architects, Atelier Kemper Thill
3. Transformation of 530 dwellings, Bordeaux, France by the architects, Lacaton and Vasal

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## Cité du Lignon

Jaccaud + Associés

Cité du Lignon by Jaccaud + Associés is an exemplary renovation project of a monumental modernist housing complex built between 1963 and 1971 in Geneva, Switzerland. The ambitious 11-year phased renovation completing in 2021 aimed to restore Le Lignon's original identity while enhancing its thermal performance and sustainability.

This project contributes to the social-ecological transformation by preserving the complex's patina and original materials, focusing on upgrading facades, glazing, and overall fabric. All 581 dual-aspect apartments were upgraded for comfort and energy efficiency, aligning with Switzerland's new thermal performance building standards. Despite the complexity of ownership and the need for extensive refurbishments, a consortium of stakeholders, including pension funds and housing associations, collaborated to ensure the unity and identity of Le Lignon.

### Ville

Geneva

### Pays

Switzerland

### Utilisation précédente

Housing

### Nouvelle utilisation

Housing, Renovation

### Année

2021

2.



## Rozemaai Housing

Atelier Kemper Thill

Rozemaai Housing by Atelier Kemper Thill is an „exterem makeover“ renovation project of a dilapidated modernist apartment blocks of the 1970's in Antwerp, Belgium. The transformation of 2019 increased the living quality of and added outdoor spaces to each flat, increasing the usable surface area from previous surface area to new surface area.

This project contributes to the social-ecological transformation by stating an example of a well-balanced relationship between sustainability and economy. The two buildings were radically stripped down to the concrete construction, were isolated and equipped with balconies, glass façades, stairwells and elevators. The living quality as well as the economic value were strongly increased while the underlying building structure could be preserved.

**City**

Antwerp

**Country**

Belgium

**Use Before**

Housing

**Use After**

Housing, Renovation, Serial

**Year**

2019

3.





## Transformation of 530 dwellings, block G, H, I

Lacaton Vassal

The transformation of 530 dwellings, building G, H, I, Cité du Grand Parc by Lacaton & Vassal is an economic extension project of 3 inhabited social buildings of the early 1960s in Bordeaux, France. While the constructions were previously only used for housing, the transformation of 2016 provided additional winter gardens and circulation, increasing the usable surface area from 38 400 m<sup>2</sup> to 68 000 m<sup>2</sup>, winter gardens included. This project contributes to the social-ecological transformation by conserving the current building without intervening on the structure, stairs, or floor, making it economical. This allows the focus to shift to the improvement of the dwellings, by adding winter gardens, resulting in renewed typologies and living conditions. The projects also enhances the performance of the building envelope, which increases its efficiency.

**City**

Bordeaux

**Country**

France

**Use Before**

Housing, Social

**Use After**

Housing, Social, Extension

**Year**

2017

All three projects cited, are complete and very successful examples of the renovation of Modernist Housing Towers that significantly extend the life of the buildings, transform the amenity of the homes to contemporary standards and retain the buildings as symbols of hope and comfort to the people of those cities.

Vibrant, hopeful, contemporary cities with engaged people do not result from the demolition of Housing and communities. The proposed demolition of the 44 Housing Towers in fact, heralds the demolition of 44 communities and all their fine grain connections to surrounding neighbourhoods and services.

The Housing Towers have embedded historical and cultural significance to Victoria. The preservation and renovation of the Towers to keep communities and neighbourhoods intact, would maintain a tangible connection to Victoria's History and heritage as a compassionate State.

Preservation and renovation as an alternative to demolition would promote deeply engaged, vibrant, hopeful and contemporary neighbourhoods as 'spirit of place' is retained and supported.

Communities thrive when they are celebrated and have a deep sense of belonging.

The impact of the Victorian building industry on the lives of all Victorians is enormously significant. The proposed impact of the demolition of 44 significant buildings and communities across Melbourne is a pending issue of supreme concern to Victoria.

The proposed demolition works will require our State to find additional housing for all displaced residents of the towers (approx. 11,000).

Of equal importance are the shops, medical centres, community centres, small businesses etc that exist to support residents. Those businesses will become redundant as the existing community disperse and fracture.

In addition, the demolition is proposed at a time when the Victorian construction industry is constantly dealing with material, energy and labour shortages.

Demolition and reconstruction as a strategy worked in the past when new construction was cheaper, faster and easier than dealing with existing buildings.

Now however, the Victorian Construction industry exists in a global context and the global context is threatened by uncertainty and one element of uncertainty is climate change.

Existing buildings and their re-use, renovation and retention is a strategy to mitigate climate change escalation.

The most sustainable buildings are the buildings that exist now. Our built environment carries substantial embodied energy, encompassing countless tons of CO2. With each building we demolish, we waste all the energy already invested in its construction.

And create additional burden on the environment as new resources are required to be mined, quarried and smelted to create new building products, not to mention the demolition waste generated and necessarily disposed in landfill.

The Victorian Building industry has a substantial and surging environmental footprint that could be assuaged if we recognized the value of existing buildings and prioritize their renovation.

We must look at the Victorian Built environment with care – kindred to when our State constructed the 44 Public Housing High Rise Towers that now symbolise an era of providing homes.

The renovation, preservation and adaption of the buildings would present enormous potential and opportunity to Victorian's by:

- saving homes and thus keeping housing prices stable,
- saving jobs by boosting local markets and upskilling local workforces,
- saving energy by preserving what is there and
- saving history by valuing the existing.

Renovation is a proven solution to ensure affordable living spaces, support small and medium scale businesses, reduce CO2 emissions and to preserve memories and communities.

It is not a quick fix solution but a transformative approach to bolster existing places and provide dynamic growth for Victoria.