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Brisbane Housing Company on blending a commercial mind with a social heart



Green Square atrium

Willow Aliento | 8 February 2018

Brisbane Housing Company's focus on quality control has spared it from any involvement in the cladding scandal engulfing others.

BHC chief executive Stuart Lummis told *The Fifth Estate* the community housing provider was "very prescriptive" regarding design and construction, and as such there had been no non-compliant cladding found on any of its properties.

It has developed around 1800 units over the past 15 years. They are a mix of owned and managed social and affordable housing, owner-occupier units and units sold to investors for private rental.

Lummis says all projects are fully documented so contractors and subcontractors "can't skinny back" on specifications.

The quality control process includes oversight of all projects by in-house construction management and a development manager. BHC also takes a site superintendent role, sending personnel out to site regularly to ensure what's been put on paper is actually what's being done.

"With compliance, you just have to step through it. There are no short-cuts," Lummis says.

This approach also extends to the selection of the design team and head contractors.

The use of some of the "big name firms" shows in the product, he says.

The facilities management team also examines all design drawings before construction commences, as BHC has long-term "skin in the game" as owner and manager of many properties.

The FM teams involvement from the outset is also a plus, particularly because if poor decisions are made in design and specification, they will be coming to management down the track and asking, "What did you do?"

Good design and maintenance

Taking the high road in terms of design and ensuring regular maintenance results in better outcomes for tenants and for the organisation.

The majority of properties have an onsite caretaker for grounds maintenance and care of common areas.

"If we don't maintain [a property], our tenants won't respect it," Lummis says.

There are also regular visits from BHC managers so properties don't become "out of sight, out of mind".

A housing manager for each property monitors the rental cycle and works with tenants experiencing financial difficulties in terms of rental payments, as well as being a point of contact for any issues such as anti-social behaviour.

"We take a holistic view," Lummis says.

"We spend a lot of money on design consultants to ensure a quality, liveable outcome."

BHC is also careful in its selection of head contractors.

Lummis says the due diligence process includes undertaking detailed reference checking if the contractor is not one BHC is familiar with. Repeat clients are contacted, as are the contractor's regular subcontractors.

"We want to make sure they are not just playing the variation game."



The board of the organisation has members from both construction and quantity surveying backgrounds, he says, which is an advantage in terms of giving the organisation a “skills-based” board.

Taking the long-term view of its assets means the organisation will “spend an extra 10 per cent now, and save on replacement costs in five years time”.

“We don’t want to cut corners to save a few pennies and have a big problem down the line.

“We don’t need to wring the last penny out of a deal.”

Breaking the stereotypes

One of the design goals is breaking the perceptions of social housing as being similar to the old Melbourne Olympic Village “toaster type product” or the neglected property with the “old Valiant up on blocks” in the front yard.

“The streetscape is important,” Lummis says. Design ensures the properties “blend into the environment” around them.

“They don’t look cookie-cutter.”

Many of the developments are also “salt and peppered” with a mix of affordable, social and private rentals.

As a result of the quality approach, social housing tenants can be houseproud.

During visits with tenants, he has heard stories of life before becoming a BHC tenant, such as years spent couch-surfing or living in cars.

“When people are in their own home, they have security, they have a platform to build on if they are struggling, for example with mental health issues.

“There are a lot of positives that come from living in a good environment.”



Sustainability means reduced occupancy costs

Lummis says being “careful and smart” with material selection and design not only reduces the ongoing maintenance burden, it also has a direct impact on occupancy costs.

All dwellings are fully insulated and buildings are clad in materials that reduce the need for mechanical heating and cooling.

Keeping operational costs for power low reduces the chances of tenants experiencing financial difficulty.

Ways this is achieved include designing for passive cooling and ventilation both for individual dwellings and for building as a whole.

In a five or six storey apartment building, for example, there may be a skylight for light and passive natural ventilation at the end of the corridors.

Low-waste building materials are also a key specification for all developments.

Greening of properties has also been a strategy, as it provides a certain amount of natural cooling, enhances the liveability and creates good public areas and opportunities for social interaction.

The Bowen Terrace development for over 55s, for example, has a greened BBQ area where tenants congregate on Friday afternoons.

The Green Square development in Fortitude Valley, which provides housing for homeless people and those at risk of homelessness, features an interior atrium that helps cool the building and minimises the need for airconditioning. It also has rainwater harvesting and water-efficient tapware.

Designed by Cox Rayner, the development was shortlisted at the 2014 World Architecture Festival awards, and won a 2013 Australian Institute of Architects national award and a commendation for sustainable architecture.

In addition to providing housing and multiple common recreation areas, the building is also a base for community groups including Basic Rights Queensland, My Community Directory, Open Doors and Brisbane City Council's Visible Ink Valley, a free space provided by Brisbane City Council for young people aged 12-25.

"With a lot of competing [apartment] product, they have conference facilities or a swimming pool. Instead we put that money into the greening of the building, which can also help with energy efficiency," Lummis says.

Some of the properties have small vegetable gardens, with tenant gardeners either selling produce to community members or giving it away. A tenant at a Coopers Plains property grows herbs they give away at a local farmers market, for example.



Building social networks

Building the social capital of properties is an ongoing process. Lummis says there is a tenant engagement process undertaken at each property every six months to establish what tenants want for their community.

Initiatives that have come out of this process include supporting Aboriginal artists and an arts program, book clubs, and an innovative “social buttons” installation at the over 55’s complex, Caggara House in Mt Gravatt, which informs tenants of events they might be interested in attending.

“The Social Buttons have acted as a real catalyst for positive social interaction and led to friendships forming quickly, something that may otherwise not have happened so readily,” Lummis says.

“Caggara House has brought together seniors from all walks of life, and this project has not only helped forge a strong community, but also given tenants an increased sense of pride in their new home.

“We don’t want people just going into their rooms and closing the door and not knowing their neighbours.”

Enabling transformation

Lummis says the organisation has helped change people’s lives.

“Our mission is creating homes, empowering lives and enabling transformation.

“We have a commercial mind and a social heart. There is a strong sense of mission in the organisation.”

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