Timeline of Victoria's Public Housing
1850's to 2020's
1850 – Melbourne's Slums

Melbourne’s inner-city suburbs are highly sought-after places to live in today. They offer boutique apartments, thriving café culture, and a busy night life, all a stone throw from the CBD. They also tend to boast median house prices of up to a million dollars – making them inaccessible for the average Aussie battler to consider living in.

But they weren’t always like this. In fact, the pricey apartments you can now see in places like Fitzroy, Collingwood, Port Melbourne, and Carlton, have overtaken what were once Melbourne’s city slums. The slums dated back as early as the 1850’s and existed in what were then working-class suburbs built up around factories that were servicing a growing city. Records don’t paint a very pretty picture of life in the slums. The housing was badly built, consisting largely of makeshift timber lean-to’s, and lacked sewerage, running water, and basic amenities.
1930 – Victoria's Public Housing is Born

From the 1930’s onward, Melbourne experienced a lingering hangover from the Great Depression, and the slums existence increased due to economic hardship resulting from this. Some parts of Melbourne did begin to see prosperity, however, residents of the slums did not reap many benefits from a city they were helping to build. Social reform was long overdue. One man, Frederick Oswald Barnett, played an integral role in raising much needed awareness on the problem of Melbourne’s slums.
Barnett visited the slums, spoke to the residents, and took photos of the conditions there. These photos were published in newspapers and helped show the rest of the city how bad the conditions were. After visiting, Barnett continued to advocate for the people living in Melbourne’s slums. He presented a valid argument to Melbourne’s politicians – these people were not dysfunctional or underserving, but rather, disadvantaged from a cycle of poverty they were powerless to escape.
Growing awareness around the slums led to activism, and a social push to eradicate them and provide adequate housing to those in need. In 1936, the Slum Abolition Board was created. A year later, the Slum Abolition Board produced a report into Melbourne’s slums – an official document that highlighted just how unlivable they had become.
The major outcome of this report was the creation of the Housing Act 1937 (Vic), and a new idea for housing in Victoria – subsidised rents to support those surviving on lower incomes. The slums were mostly demolished, and replaced with more suitable public housing. In 1938, the Slum Abolition Board was replaced with the Housing Commission of Victoria. This body was granted autonomy over the provision of public housing.
1940 - The Post War Housing Crisis

Shortly after this, however, and much like many other places around the world, Melbourne began to feel the social and economic impact from World War II. A major shortage in housing began to push working class families out of the housing market. The Camp Pell slum, which was originally established as a military camp in Melbourne’s Royal Park, became inhabited by thousands of Melbourne’s struggling families who were experiencing homelessness.
Several other emergency camps were established to house families in the post war era, including Fawkner Park, Watsonia, South Melbourne and Port Melbourne. Camp Pell, though, or Camp Hell as it was labelled, was notorious for being one of the worst. By this point, it was estimated that there was a shortage of up to 300,000 houses across Australia, vastly overwhelming the available supply of building materials.
In 1943, to help alleviate the growing problem of housing and homelessness, the Commonwealth Housing Commission was established. This Federal body was responsible for the establishment of the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA), and for allocating funding to the states and territories. Two years later, in 1945, the Housing Commission of Victoria purchased the Holmesglen factory, to build prefabricated public housing that was assembled on site.
Public housing in Victoria began to see significant expansion, including the establishment of public housing estates in both regional and suburban Victoria. Included in these estates were the Ascot Vale and Richmond racecourse, both acquired from well-known Melbourne figure John Wren. The State Government took advantage of these inner-city land plots to establish public housing estates that you can still see there today.
1950’s - Construction of the Olympic Village

The 1950’s saw Victoria begin to move out of the shadow of the war and towards what was to be a prosperous decade, attracting a boom in immigration to the area. In 1956, Melbourne was proud to host the 16th Summer Olympics. Accommodation for athletes was needed, and city and State officials decided to build the Olympic Village in Heidelberg West.
Construction of the village, which was aimed to house up to 5,000 Olympic athletes, took less than two years. Later use as public housing was intended for the athlete’s village, and it was converted to an estate immediately after the Olympics had ended. Still known today as Olympic Village, the estate continues to exist as a thriving community. If you visit, you’ll see the original Olympic rings hanging over Alamein road, a quiet nod to the estate’s past life.
1960’s

1960 - Construction of High-Rise Towers

By 1960, Melbourne’s population had ticked over 1.8 million people, and showed no signs of slowing down. During this decade, the State Government took a more ambitious approach to housing its growing population, and commenced the building of large-scale high-rise public housing towers across 14 of Melbourne’s inner-city suburbs. Today, you can see 44 of these high-rise towers dotting the skylines around Melbourne, including ones in Richmond, Ascot Vale, Fitzroy and Flemington. The main goal of building these towers was to create cost efficient homes on mass.

Towards the end of the 1960’s, funding that was being channeled into public housing began to diminish. To compensate for this, the Housing Commission created a scheme where they began selling public housing dwellings to the families who were renting them, requiring a 5% down payment and an interest rate of 4.5%. By the end of this scheme, 49,635 had been sold to tenants. Although this was successful in redistributing housing to create generational wealth for families, it also saw public housing stock more than halve in numbers across Victoria.
1970 - Investment is Wound Back

In 1972, the Ministry of Housing was established. After this, though, both State and Federal Governments took a different approach towards housing policy. Neoliberal economics was popularised, and government social support was wound back as individualism became a core value within politics. This was the last time, for a long time, that Victoria witnessed any significant investment in public housing.
1980 – A Housing Crisis Looms

Just after a decade of operation, the Ministry of Housing created the Housing Act 1983, with its main objective being that, “every person in Victoria has adequate and appropriate housing at a price within his or her means.” The Housing Act 1983 also saw the Housing Commission of Victoria abolished, and the Office of Housing created in 1984.
Despite the intentions of the Housing Act 1983, Victoria began to see a decline in the affordability of all housing. The median house price in Melbourne in 1980 was just $40,800. By 2016, this price had risen to $713,000. Rental properties were gradually becoming unaffordable to those surviving on minimum wage. This saw more and more Victorian families applying for social housing – a growing number of people for a not so growing number of public housing properties. Public housing in Victoria failed to keep up with a booming population for the next four decades.
2000 – the VPTA is Established

The turn of the new millennia saw the addition of a new advocacy group step onto the public housing scene – us. In 2000, after advocacy from many public housing tenants, the Victorian Public Tenants Association was founded.

Aerial view of Northcote Estate via,
We are the peak body for people who live in public housing in Victoria, to represent their voices, and advocate for better public housing. Funding was provided by the Office of Housing, and soon after we were provided with a permanent office space in the Melbourne suburb of Northcote, where we stayed for the next two decades.
In the same decade, Victoria’s economy was hit significantly by the Global Financial Crisis. To help alleviate the impact of this, the Commonwealth stepped in, and in 2009 announced the Social Housing Initiative. The aim of this was to increase social housing stock across the nation. Within it, Victoria was allocated $1.2 million in funding to go towards the building and maintenance of social housing. Overall, the Social Housing Initiative was successful in providing more housing to vulnerable Victorians, as well as boosting the economy of Australia more broadly.
2010 – Public Housing Reaches a Critical Point

By the time this decade came around, public housing in Victoria had lacked serious investment for too long, and much of it had fallen into disrepair. Now in a critical position to do something, the State Government made a number of significant announcements. In 2017, Homes for Victorians was released, a $2.6 billion funding plan that detailed the future of housing and homelessness services. Included in this plan was the $1 billion Social Housing Growth Fund, allocated to promote the community housing industry.
A further $185 million was allocated to the Public Housing Renewal Plan in 2017, which is an initiative to renew around 2,500 public housing dwellings across the state, and redevelop them with an increased number of social housing properties. Again, these properties will be managed by private housing providers, classifying them as community housing and not public housing.
The Victorian Public Tenants Association has opposed, and continues to oppose, the management of new properties going to community housing providers instead of remaining publicly managed.
In 2018, we announced our Homes for All Campaign, highlighting that the waitlist to a social housing property had grown to 82,000, and demanding action to address this. Over 700 community members, 20 organisations and 18 MPs joined to support the campaign. Later in the same year, the State Government made an election promise to build 1,000 new public housing dwellings, to help alleviate homelessness in Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat. The success of this campaign has meant that the 1,000 dwelling are predicted to be built by 2022. In 2019, the State Government also announced that it was making some changes to the Residential Tenancy Act. Aimed at making renting fairer, these included changes in minimum standards for properties, and rules around what rental providers must disclose to renters.
2020 – A Historical Investment, but not for Public Housing

By 2020, the waitlist to get into a social housing property was estimated to be over 100,000 people - a problem that had well reached crisis point. At the beginning of 2020, the Housing Peaks Alliance, a group the Victorian Public Tenants Association are a part of, released a framework for the planning of social housing over the next decade, named Make Social Housing Work. The framework called for, among other initiatives, the construction of 9,300 social housing properties every year for the next 10 years, including 300 for Indigenous housing.
In November of the same year, the State Government announced a historic investment into social housing. Named the Big Housing Build, this investment has been promoted to include $5.3 billion worth of funding towards social and affordable housing in Victoria. This includes the building of more than 9,300 social housing dwellings that will be owned by the government but managed by private housing providers. Again, this classifies them not as public housing, but as community housing. The number of publicly managed housing dwellings is not slated to grow within this initiative. The beginning of 2021 also saw another change for the Victorian Public Tenants Association, as we moved into a new home. We are now located on Brunswick street in Fitzroy, on Wurundjeri Country.
What's Next for Public Housing?

Historically, public housing has supported Victoria’s most vulnerable for nearly 100 years. Not only is it an important social asset to a vibrant and growing state, its place in our towns and suburbs is woven deeply into our history. Victoria’s public housing holds stories of strength, resilience, and hope. Today, it provides housing to a diverse population, including our elderly, young families, migrants, and many others seeking shelter and refuge - and a place to call home. But, if we are going to safely house our growing population, **publicly owned and managed housing must grow.**
References


References


