

LIVING BY DESIGN JENNY BROWN

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From cold streets to cool digs

When outside-the-square architecture meets community need, the results can be life-changing.

BROADMEADOWS and community housing are not terms often linked with the idea of excellence in architecture.

Yet in this year's Victorian Architecture Awards a very different community housing estate of 84 apartments contained in two medium-rise, five-storey buildings, is contesting the Residential Architecture — Multiple Housing category against multi-unit blocks that started out with much more cash in the budget and greater cachet in the address and potential clientele.

Built for tenants who might otherwise be living in rooming houses of questionable security and sanitary conditions or who might even live under a bridge, the two new buildings comprising the Pearcedale Parade community housing project were designed by the Collingwood practice Carabott Holt Architects. The noble but sincere aim of the exercise was, architect David Carabott says, to give socially marginalised people a sense of dignity and identity in a place they could call home.

"That's what architecture can do," he says. "It can change people's lives."

Sited in the vital and renewing civic precinct of Broadmeadows and within walking distance of the station, the buildings — one wood-clad wing designated for singles who live in small, 30-square-metre studio-style apartments and the other a variegated brick building containing a mixture of two-bedroom, three-bedroom and disability-adapted units of more than 60 square metres for families — were commissioned by the affordable housing charity, Yarra Community Housing.

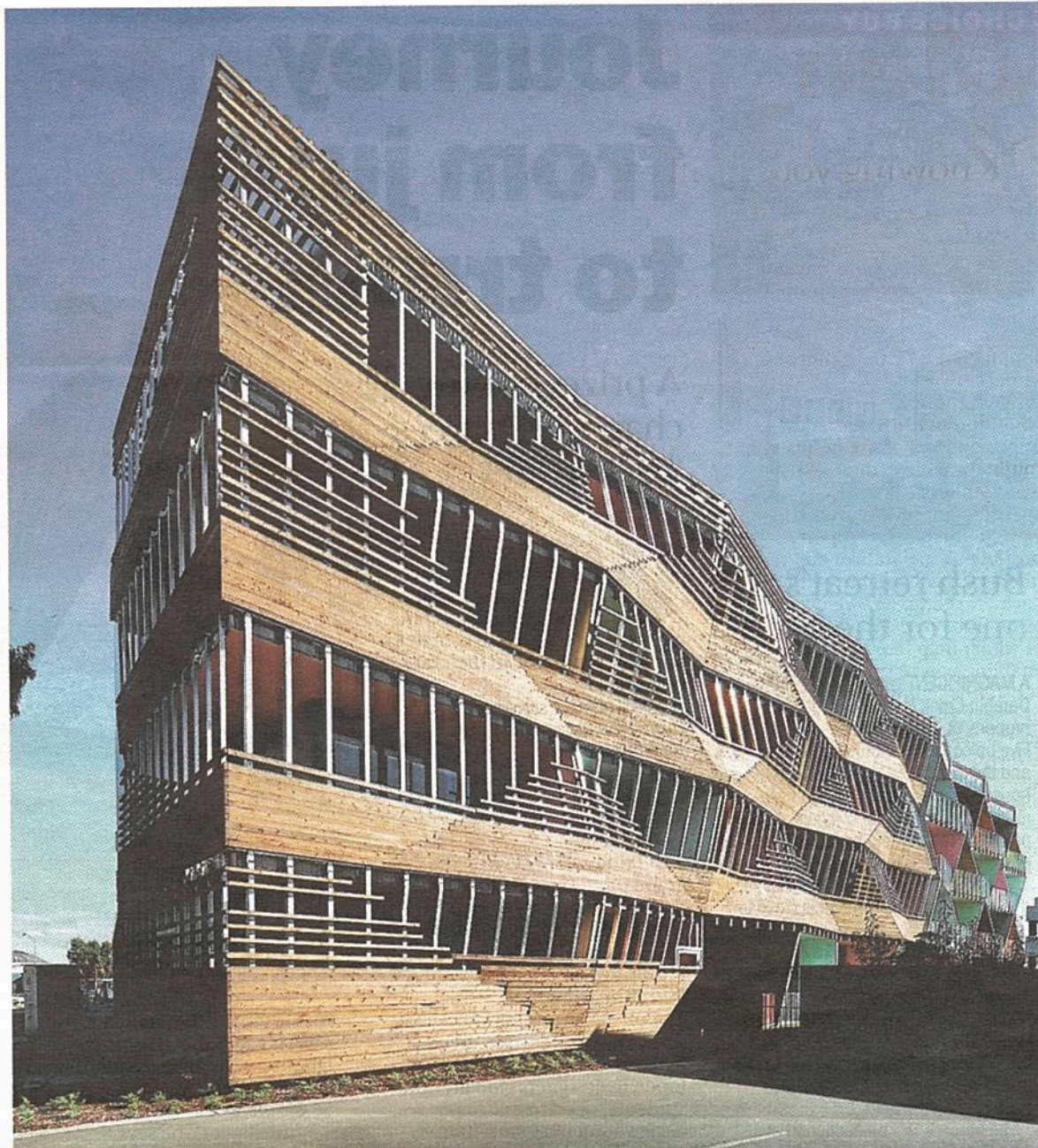
Carabott says his practice seized the commission "as an exciting opportunity" and approached it in an unconventional way — espe-



cially considering it was social housing. "We tried to make it fun and we tried to make it beautiful. "We used colour to brighten up the buildings to make them cheery. We also chose to make them look like residential buildings that would not be out of place in Richmond."

The point of this approach was to make small units feel as secure and personable as private houses so their tenants would respect the spaces. "If you have a little grey concrete box," he says, "it will give you no sense of identity and it will very quickly be covered in graffiti. But if you give them something like this, something that tenants are more grateful for, they will tend to look after their spaces."

The utility of the units had to be spatially practical and sensibly durable. "To stand the test of time, it



Pearcedale Parade's striking zigzagged section of single spaces and, left, the larger units and an interior.

had to be robust architecture and we dealt with that by using common, honest materials like brick, timber, concrete and galvanised steel," he says.

For low-income or Centrelink-dependent clients, energy consumption also had to be as conservative as possible. There are solar hot water systems and solar-boosted communal hydronic heating systems. There is no artificial airconditioning. Vents above each unit's doorway provide cross ventilation instead.

Stairwells and walkways are external, eliminating the need for artificial daytime lighting and maintaining the enlivening quality of fresh air in shared spaces.

The units are pragmatically laid out and fitted out, "with not too many walls" and not a millimetre

wasted. Cupboards work as room dividers in the studios "where corridors become kitchens". In the family units, bedrooms are unusually big and bright.

But while it is all so pragmatically staged, there is a great deal to admire in the exterior aesthetics of the buildings and in the way they generate engagingly variable movement and sight lines from the shared vestibules. Carabott Holt chose to give the singles' wing a most extraordinary crumpled and zigzagging screening effect of pre-aged Australian hardwood timbers.

Behind this apparently collapsing geometry are private balconies picked out in bright colours, or shared open corridors "that are not just boring, straight gun barrels", Carabott says.

Myra Kitchenman of Yarra

Community Housing says: "We love how it all looks. It doesn't look institutional. It's interesting [architecture] yet colourful and airy and it is all about providing spaces where the tenants really want to be. It's about normalising apartment living for homeless people or people who have been living in crappy rooms."

She has seen the clients, who began moving in late last year, "burst into tears when they move in. That's the nicest part of the job."

That's the one of the best aspects of the work for Carabott. "Seeing how architecture really can change people's lives."

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