

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Apartment Design Standards

Melbourne—Wednesday, 24 November 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Sarah Connolly—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Ms Cindy McLeish

WITNESSES

Ms Arianna Garay, Research Member,

Mr Derek Huynh, Research Member, and

Ms Divya Sri Sunkara, Research Member, Ignite.

The CHAIR: I advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with Legislative Assembly standing order 234.

Thank you for joining us today. I am sorry we have had a couple of IT glitches. Thanks for coming in to join us at the public hearing for the Inquiry into Apartment Design Standards.

On behalf of the committee I acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of this land, and we pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be joining us here today. I also again extend a very warm welcome to any members of the public and the media watching us today. This is one of several public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee is conducting to inform itself about the issues relevant to this inquiry.

Before I begin I need to point out a couple of things to you. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. What that means is that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give, but it is also really important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to the comments that you make outside of this hearing, even if you are just simply restating what you said here today.

You will also receive a draft transcript of the evidence in the next week or so, and that is for you to read over, to check and to approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thanks again for coming in today. Let us start off. I will introduce myself. My colleagues will let you know who they are and where they exist in the different parts of Victoria. Then I will throw over to you guys, and if you just introduce yourselves. Based on time today, maybe make it a 5-minute presentation. We love asking questions—politicians love asking questions—so leave plenty of time for that. My name is Sarah Connolly, and you can see I am the Chair of this committee. Most importantly I am the Member for Tarneit.

Mr FOWLES: My name is Will Fowles. I exist in Burwood, a middle-ring suburb.

Mr HAMER: Paul Hamer. I am the Member for Box Hill.

The CHAIR: Cindy.

Ms McLEISH: Cindy McLeish, Member for Eildon, Shadow Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Shadow Minister for Tourism and Shadow Minister for Sport.

The CHAIR: Very shortly we will have another member of Parliament, Danielle Green, pop in to join us, and she is the Member for Yan Yean. I am going to hand over to you, Arianna.

Visual presentation.

Ms GARAY: Thank you so much. Good morning, everyone. My name is Arianna Garay. I am here with Derek Huynh and Divya Sunkara on behalf of Ignite. We thank you for allowing us the opportunity to present today. Our views will be of the Ignite research team. We are a not-for-profit organisation supported by the University of Melbourne, and we partner with organisations to explore how the built environment could advance social, environmental and economic progress.

Can I have the next slide, please. We also would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land that we are meeting on, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and we pay our respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

So child-friendly apartments—there has never been a greater need for it than now. The Victoria In Future report by DELWP came out in 2019 and predicted that within the next 30 years the largest proportion of population growth will be in families with children.

In the past year or so we have been working on creating guidelines on existing research around the world, and our fellow collaborators, Committee for Melbourne's Future Focus Group, which has led the business case, and our supporters, City of Melbourne, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Lendlease and the Office of the Victorian Government Architect, have worked with us, our team—myself, Derek, Divya, Jeremy, Richard and Shaun; a multidisciplinary team—to lead these design guidelines.

So we will take you through today what we have come up with. And I will hand over to Divya, who will take us through terms of reference (a): what are the current standards of apartments in Victoria?

Ms SUNKARA: Thanks, Arianna. The findings we present in the next few slides are from our research and multiple workshops we have held with various stakeholders—like parents, real estate agents, developers—who are essentially in the apartment living business. Join us as we walk through the different spaces in an apartment to identify the concerns and difficulties faced in everyday living.

As we see here, we step out of the lift and we are greeted by a narrow, blank corridor. Many parents raised concerns, stating it is dead and an empty space. As we reach the entrance of the unit with a pram in one hand and sometimes shopping bags in the other, parents usually fiddle with their prams and then just shove it on the side without any proper storage. And then once they go inside, there is the kitchen. There is no way they can supervise their kids—because most of the kitchens are designed to be L-shaped—when the child is right behind them when they are cooking, when they are cleaning. They cannot do anything about that. And then also, if you look at the floors, there is spill. The parents cannot see it, so there is no way they can get rid of the floor stains on the carpets.

As we move into the most, as I must say, multi-use space in the house—the living space—it is impossible for them to use it as a play zone or work in there. As we know, it is the new normal now, work from home. Many parents pointed to not having enough storage as the major concern of their dwellings. And then not many rooms are left other than the bathroom and the bedroom now. As I quote, no parent feels safe with a low-rise balustrade when their child is on the balcony. As we make our way into the bathrooms, not only is there no bathtub but the doors are so narrow the kids cannot get the bath time they deserve. A few parents opted to buy additional accessories, like bathtubs and sinks, for them to accommodate that or even to have a sink big enough where they can handwash their baby clothes.

We would like to include one more slide about communal areas, as they form an integral part of an apartment, which is also used as one of the key features when they are being sold. With a space as big as that, which can have multiple uses, it is most commonly used as communal dining. I quote the father's point: 'We only ever use it for hosting parties'.

I will now hand it to Derek to run us through our solutions—terms of reference (b): what are the improvements that can be made to the livability in apartments, including communal spaces?

Mr HUYNH: What was really important about that was we wanted to give you a quick glimpse about what the experience is like entering an apartment, going through your own unit and going to the spaces that are shared with other units. What I want to show you now is what we think could be the vision of where apartment living could be, based on our research and the ideas we have come up with.

So if we were to replay that whole thing: rather than getting off the lift at your floor and being greeted by a very narrow corridor, what if that corridor was just slightly wider—like in the sketch here—wide enough that you could put a bit of furnishing, that you could design the window opening to the outside as a way of that mingling space? That is really important, especially if there is a child and a pram and you are moving around. It is much easier to manoeuvre. The extra design feature here also allows for moments of mingling and meeting other families with young children as well, which is quite important, especially to create that feeling of community within the same building.

Once you have passed the lift lobby and you walk toward the apartment entry, rather than walking in and just having a wall on one side and your kitchen on the other you are greeted instead, opening the door, with a

dedicated storage space and alcove. So you can easily push your pram in. You can put all the dirty clothes, such as the dirty boots and that your children might have worn, right from the wet weather outside.

Once you walk past that and you do look at the kitchen, rather than the kitchen being L-shaped it has actually got an island bench now instead. This is a simple thing. We are not asking for bigger kitchens or more space. We are really just asking: how can the kitchen be designed to encourage people to use it in a way that improves living with children? So what you saw earlier with the L-shaped kitchen is if you have an L-shaped kitchen at home and you are cutting up vegetables or you are washing the dishes in the sink or you are cooking on the stovetop, every single moment you are actually staring at a splashback in front of you; you are staring at the wall. Just by introducing an island bench, now half the time you spend in the kitchen is actually spent looking towards the play space of your child, like what we have got there. Just that simple move actually makes a huge difference in how much you can supervise your children. And by putting the island bench there it actually separates the cooking from where your child's play space is in a non-intimidating way.

Rather than the balcony just being a space that is just there, according to parents, by creating a winter garden and pulling up that glass we can actually create a dedicated zone for children to play in. That does wonders in a few ways. Firstly, you can see here that the space for them is the closest that they can get to that natural light, to that fresh air that parents really want children to have. Secondly, it means that we have actually separated the space for play, for all their toys—especially large dolls houses and cars that they have—away from the main living area, which makes it easy for the parents as well, if they are working from home or if they have got guests over.

We also looked at smaller design interventions and asked: how can we do more with what we currently have? So here is an example on the left that Divya showed before where there could be a study nook. Just simply introducing a few doors in front of that study nook also allows it to double up as storage. So during work hours that could be used as a study nook by parents working from home, but afterwards it can also be used to store the kids toys so that parents can feel comfortable having their friends over again.

The bathroom—one of the most contentious issues is not having the ability to bathe young children, and it is much more difficult when it does not quite work out for the people who need to deliver these buildings. So having the standard shower is actually the go-to for many developers and builders, because it is much more efficient because it is usually prefabricated offsite. We asked: how can we still allow for children to be bathed comfortably and for parents to want to do so without a bathtub? Well, there are a few tiny tweaks that we can make to really make it work. In this case what you see instead is, rather than a fixed showerhead, a handheld showerhead, which means now every parent can go out and buy a portable bathtub for only the three or four years that they need to use it to be able to bathe their children in the shower. Make the door to the shower slightly larger as well, or forgo the door, so that it is really easy to bring the child and the bathtub in and out.

Then, as you see on the left there, make the sink much larger. So we saw a few photos and instances where the sink was literally, like, this size. That is okay if it is us trying to wash our faces, but it is much more difficult when you have to clean your kids clothes. So just re-spec'ing that sink to be much larger—it is these small details that can make a really large difference.

Finally, and we are quite passionate about this one: communal spaces. When we did speak to parents, as Divya mentioned earlier—there are quite a few in existing development, but our question was: rather than providing more, how can we provide better? How can we do more with what we have? And as we showed earlier, in the earliest story, a lot of the spaces are really used on those once-off events, whether it is having guests over, entertaining for a dinner or a party, but one of the key opportunities here is asking: how can these communal spaces not be used once or a few times a month? How can they be the day-to-day spaces that supplement apartment unit living?

In this case, what we want to show here is a flexible multi-use space. So what you see, rather than a dining space, is actually almost like an apartment co-working space, and then we separated it a bit more. What is key here is thinking rather than actually having one large space that is dedicated to one demographic, how can we dedicate it to several demographics and how can that change over the space of a day? So you could imagine working from home one morning there, and if you had a young child they could be out on the left there playing with their toys in their own space, rather than it being two separate spaces. Just that glass wall allows you to

continue to supervise your child whilst you are having that acoustic treatment required so you can still be on your Zoom call.

What happens if your child is a little older? What if they are going to school now and they come home and they want to do their homework and the parents are cooking very loudly in the kitchen? They could come down here, and towards the right, towards the back there, they could be studying in a little focus hub. But during the day that could also double up for parents working from home as a teleconference room.

What about enabling children to do more than just study? One of the key things about music, for example, is the majority of Australian children learn music while they are in their school years. But where is that space to learn that in apartment units? These study hubs on the right, which have been designed to be acoustically isolated, could be fantastic spaces to double up as instrument rooms for these children, so the parent could still be out in the centre of the space and they could supervise their child, whether they are a very young toddler all the way up to their school years.

What we really wanted to do, though, was ensure that as many of these design interventions as possible could actually be feasible. Here is a quick summary of all the interventions we have come up with, so there are many more than we have pointed out today. What we do want to make a point of is we then piloted on a theoretical site in Docklands with some project partners. With the cost managers on our team, we have actually worked out that the total cost increase was only around 2 per cent more. Surprisingly, that was significantly offset by the 5 per cent more that the parents were willing to pay for those features. So how did we get there and what do we really want to share with you after showing that?

Our process: here is where we started it. We looked at these major cities around the world and asked: how have they been doing it so far? Some of them are decades ahead, some of them are just at a similar time, some of them have really formalised guidelines, some of them have a bit more informal research. We then collected all that information into—probably not very legible here—a very, very big spreadsheet where we mapped out in each city what they do in living rooms, what they prescribed and asked for in kitchens, what they asked for in dining rooms, in balconies, in bedrooms and bathrooms, and we mapped it all out. And through that we did identify that the guidelines had identified a lot about what children and parents want in apartment living, but what we also noticed is what children want and what parents want is sometimes different to what is actually needed.

So what you see on the left there is a very brief summary of an example. If you were to ask a parent, ‘What do you look for when you go to an outdoor play space for your child?’, their answer would be, ‘We want to go to the place where my child has the most fun—it is this particular park here’ or ‘We go to this park because it is only 2 minutes away from where we live—convenience is really key’ or ‘We go to this particular park and we go at 9.00 in the morning because that is when we feel safest’. But if you look towards the right, the answers were very, very different when we actually asked, ‘What’s needed for a child so that they can actually develop healthfully and develop the key lifelong traits and skills that they need?’. The child health specialists did not answer those questions. They actually said, ‘We need a space that is large enough so that the child can play with objects, so that they can actually practise their motor skills. We need a space inviting enough that the child can actually engage with other children and build their social skills. We need a space that has different materials so that they can start to explore themselves and engage with other elements of their outside worlds. We need a space that is not just a flat rooftop barbecue area, because a child needs to actually practise going up and down slopes to also improve their motor skills.

What we learned from this was not just asking ourselves, ‘What is currently out there?’, but ‘What could these guidelines also become? How can we get what children need into this equation and not just focus on what parents and children have identified that they want?’. That is exactly what we did in our process. We then went out and we looked at the national quality standards, which are set up by an organisation as part of the Australian national body in child health, and we collected all of what parents and children want and then we paired it with what is actually needed as well. We identified there were some gaps that existing guidelines did not fill around the world that we could be the first one to really push for here.

I promise this is the last slide now. We then needed to make sure that these things could be delivered as well. So as part of our process we did not just stop there. We then went out and we spoke to real estate agents, we spoke to developers, we went to the cost managers, we spoke to other architects, we went to planners, and we

of course spoke to many, many parents with young children, and we asked them, ‘What do you think of this intervention?’. They would give us feedback. We would then take that all back. We would go back to the drawing board and we would redevelop that idea until we could get it to a point where it could align with as many stakeholders as possible—because we understand that although we can come up with these solutions which can improve child wellbeing and child development and the wellbeing of families, it would not be enough if it could not be easily applied. It would not be enough, unless the developer would be like, ‘Yes, we are happy to do that, we can see the benefit in that’—or the builder, or the architect.

Ms GARAY: Thank you, Derek, for taking us through that narrative, and Divya as well. As you guys can see, with the current population growth it will be difficult, and we do know that two-thirds of the growth will be in established Melbourne in the next 30 years. That is why we believe, and we hope, that the future of apartments will be family friendly and will consider the families of the future.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Arianna and Derek. That was a very, very interesting presentation. I think what sort of struck me is that a lot of those apartments are not fit for families, and having two young children myself, I would say that they are certainly difficult places to raise children. You pointed out a lot of those things, about the showers and about the laundry and stuff in communal spaces. You just touched on the question that I wanted to ask you. I want to have a look at the data. Are more families actually wanting to live in apartments? The reason why I ask that is that there are sorts of basic things that seem to be quite cost effective for developers to go ahead and tweak and change as part of that apartment design. Would you say that one of the reasons that has not happened is that the demand from families is just simply not there—so apartments are designed for a particular demographic or a particular cohort? Just on the information you have pointed out, it is quite obviously not for families with children, particularly families with any more than one child, and it would become very difficult having even toddlers in those kinds of apartments, for the obvious reasons you have pointed out. What are the actual stats on that?

Ms GARAY: Yes. I think we will have to take part of that question on notice.

The CHAIR: That is okay.

Ms GARAY: But we did interview under, I believe, 10-15 sets of parents, and some of those parents did reflect a cultural shift into thinking, ‘I want to be living in an apartment. I want that infrastructure and those facilities. I want them to be available to me because I have grown up in that apartment living [mindset] and I want to be able to continue to live that lifestyle’. However, it does reflect the points that you have mentioned. That is reflected in their comments as well: ‘Now that I have a child, my apartment is not fit for purpose. It’s not designed for my child. I can’t grow [my family] here’. One of the parents that we interviewed initially bought a South Yarra apartment because they really wanted to have that lifestyle—those cafes, those clubs—but they never planned to have a child. However, they did have one, and they will have to live in their apartment for the next five years to be able to build up that capital to buy detached housing outside, and by then they will still be living in their apartment. We actually interviewed this parent before the very first lockdown, so obviously their answers were not reflective of the fact that they were in [experiencing] COVID—like, they would have to deal with that apartment space—but they had that freedom to leave their apartment if they felt a little bit claustrophobic with their child. Actually a lot of our interviews happened over COVID, so that is why a lot of these interventions really came from parents telling us, ‘I can’t deal with living in this apartment with my child. However, I still want that availability of all of those amenities’—not just basic amenities. Living in high-amenity areas, they are allowed to thrive. Their lives are actually much better for that.

The CHAIR: Just on that, on the people that you interviewed, how many left their apartment and how many left and purchased an apartment that was more suitable—really, I would say, a lot of it comes down to size—to having a family?

Ms GARAY: Again, we can take that question on notice, but that was one of the questions that we took the parents through. I would also like to reiterate that we did not just ask these parents once. With our agile methodology we actually came back to them quite a few times, which allowed us to ask the questions from ‘What do you want in your apartment?’ to ‘Now we have researched these things, does this work for you—yes or no?’, and then the third round was, ‘We’ve costed it, we’ve asked the developers. How much more are you willing to pay?’. We did ask the question of some of the parents—because some of them are now living in detached dwellings or townhouses—‘In your experience of living through apartments, what were your reasons

for leaving?', and we do understand it is that bedroom size or the storage space, but that is why we tried to really intervene in some of the small-scale design aspects of apartments.

The CHAIR: And I think there is that question of: especially after you have had children and they are getting older and you have more than one, would you go back to living in an apartment with children as opposed to a detached townhouse or a house?

Ms GARAY: Yes.

Mr HUYNH: I think, to add to that, there was one really, really interesting finding that we identified very early on. We were asking with this, 'How can we make sure these interventions can work across any sort of multi-unit development, so not just in a tower in the city? How can we make sure that it can work in the middle-ring suburbs and also the outer suburbs where any council, government or developer is looking to increase density?'. We were given the pilot site in Docklands, and we asked, 'What are we actually looking at here? Who is the demographic? Are they actually parents who want to live in apartments?'. When we actually looked at the demographics, over 80 per cent of parents with children living in Docklands were living in apartments that were a standard three-bedroom or smaller. So to us it was no longer even a question of 'How much interest is there?'; it was more of 'Hold on, there are a lot of people renting—not so much buying off the plan but renting—in these apartments; how can we make it better for them?'. So that is sort of why we were so interested in pushing for coming up with these design interventions that could work for a developer who is not even interested in selling their apartments to families with children. These design interventions would be done in a way where if they adopted them easily enough a family with a child or children living in an apartment because they are renting, which is 80 per cent of the time, would be living in a home that is better for them.

The CHAIR: Okay. That is good. I am going to pause my questions there. Cindy, I am just mindful of your time because I know unfortunately you have to leave us at a particular time, so I am going to surprise you and throw to you first.

Ms McLEISH: That is not a problem. Thank you. It is really interesting, and it has certainly given us some food for thought. Where is the difference between a townhouse and an apartment?

Ms GARAY: I think this question would be better answered by Divya, who is our quantity surveyor, and she will probably tell you a lot about labour workforce and also costings.

Ms McLEISH: Because you see a lot of the density with the number of townhouses. So six townhouses on a block are not apartments because they do not share a common entrance or something?

Ms GARAY: Yes. I think with the opportunity of apartments you will have that shared space, those communal and those extra areas, that you will not be able to experience with a townhouse development; with townhouse developments you will just have those tiny yards. And this is not just talking about dwellings per hectare, because the typical way of subdivision is to just continue to divide the lot whereas the opportunity here is that if you do grow [build] to just a three-storey walk-up then you are able to provide more amenity space and more garden space in a 2000-square-metre lot than if you had divided it into six townhouses. But I do want to hand over to Divya to talk about those costings.

Ms SUNKARA: I think with the construction, preliminaries and margins vary when it is townhouses and towers. We do a lot of savings on towers on the preliminaries because that is much larger scale. But other than that, townhouses—the pool of contractors is different, so their margins are much lower, the prelims are much lower. So at the end of the day we get what we want. The costs do not vary too much, but the number of dwellings changes.

Ms McLEISH: What percentage of families do you think live in apartments? Say, in the Docklands area you have got a tower with 50 floors and 10 apartments on each floor. What percentage of families have kids?

Ms GARAY: So I think this will be another question we will take on notice, but we did receive data from our partner City of Melbourne about the amount of families living in apartments. Could you confirm, Derek?

Mr HUYNH: Yes.

Ms McLEISH: Following on from that, with teenagers: I have got an apartment in Southbank in a tower. We are on the 33rd floor. We often see kids in school uniform there, but I guess one thing that this apartment block has got that a lot of others might not have is a very large communal area—lots of outdoor space and pools and gyms and stuff like that that is probably quite easy for families. But I imagine that there are a lot of smaller ones that do not have that as well.

With balconies—this is my last question, Sarah—you talked about the glass. I look as I drive down the freeway and I see all these apartments with balconies and glass that might be a metre or so high and I wonder: don't people accidentally have too much to drink and tip out over them or kids climb up? I was talking to someone about it the other day. It was one of your recommendations.

Ms GARAY: Yes, that really came out from one of the parents that we had interviewed who had the concern that her child's toys were falling off the balcony because there was actually a space of about 15 centimetres from the balcony floor to the balustrade. Now, obviously we are not sure when that apartment was built, if that was before the design standards or not, but it is certainly a concern—hence why we introduced the winter garden. But the winter garden is not just trying to answer those kinds of questions; we wanted the intervention to be better, in which case we looked at those national quality standards. We have got all of those development milestones, and we understand that air, sunlight—all of that—is actually really beneficial for children, especially between zero and five years of age.

Ms McLEISH: Yes, I like that idea. I was just worried about that safety component. That will do me, thanks, Sarah.

Ms GARAY: And one more thing: with balconies, building managers do not allow you to hang your clothes on them. Other than having a cup of coffee you cannot do anything with a 1.2-metre balustrade—fire hazard especially. So if we have a winter garden, it is multipurpose, essentially.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Cindy. I am going to throw to our Mr Noisy here.

Mr FOWLES: Sorry. Excuse my rattling chair. Tell me, just as a framing question, I guess: was this research just done for the purposes of this inquiry or was it done for a whole bunch of other purposes?

Ms GARAY: We started this research at the start of last year—

Mr FOWLES: Right. I was going to say that if you had turned it around in that time it would have been amazing. I was actually going to offer you a job.

Ms GARAY: I do like my job. But, yes, we started this at the start of last year with Future Focus Group again, who led the business case, and it really has developed. I guess [in] the flexibility circus of going through COVID meant we only actually ever had two real-life meetings with our team. That was also including us meeting and being put together by Derek, who is basically our team lead. But essentially, yes, we have had all of our Zoom calls and really done this over COVID. We actually finished this about October or November last year—

Mr HUYNH: Yes.

Mr FOWLES: I mean, there is just some fantastic thinking in there. I am really, really impressed with the quality of the research and the fact that you have gone that additional step, that really important third step, where you have gone, 'Well, here are the great ideas. Now we are just actually going to ask the professionals whether it can be done, and if it can be done, how it gets done'—

Ms GARAY: And we certainly did—

Mr FOWLES: Yes, I absolutely applaud that.

Ms GARAY: Our developer partners definitely, you know—wealth with ideas.

Mr FOWLES: So tell me, though, what were the elements you got the pushback on? What were the things that encountered the most I guess institutional resistance from developers, designers, regulators or others?

Ms GARAY: So I am very familiar with what we would get pushback on from the parents, but I think I will hand this over to my team because they definitely handled all of those developer questions and meetings. Guys?

Ms SUNKARA: One, floorboards—not just floorboards, materials in general.

Mr FOWLES: And was the pushback around cost?

Ms SUNKARA: Yes, cost—top priority. Do you want to talk about the design?

Mr HUYNH: Yes. So with the floors there was a little bit of pushback. But what we can see is that the pushback happens most when the features only seem to work for that particular demographic of children, because they think it is not justified if only 5 per cent of our buyers are going to be families with children, right? That was the key thing that we needed to go through: how do we still keep the feature open to as much of the market as possible? I think the really, really big pushback was understanding how community spaces could function better. That was a huge thing in terms of their marketing approach. It actually goes towards what was mentioned earlier from the committee, which was there are some developments with a lot of communal amenity. You have got your pools, you have got your gyms, you have got your cinema rooms, you have got playrooms—everything. And then there are some that do not have much.

We thought, ‘How can we actually make this work?’. Because there is so much amenity that is really important, and it should not be based on how large or how small your apartment is, especially if we want apartments to work not just in the city. Because when you think about it, it is only the really large apartments, like 200-plus units, that justify such glamorous communal spaces. And we started to ask, ‘How can we make the economies of scale work better here?’. Fortunately the developer we are partnered with—this is just an example to sort of get the thinking going—prided themselves on developing precincts. So this one test site we were looking at was actually one of like six parcels that they wanted to develop. We said, ‘You know what, rather than putting a swimming pool in every single one of those six buildings, what if you actually just had a swimming centre as a shared amenity across all of them?’. The efficiencies would be so much higher. Then, rather than building an amenity that just services 200 units or 400 or just one building, you are servicing six times that. Isn’t it a bit more justifiable now to have some child-friendly spaces?

Mr FOWLES: So tell me: why aren’t architects just doing this now? What is the reason why seemingly logical and not particularly expensive alterations to kind of the stock design are not being incorporated at the moment? Is this a perception about the value of those buyers or is it about something else?

Mr HUYNH: I will partially put that question on notice, if that is all right, to answer that. I am not saying this is the mentality of all developers. We did want to try and get a larger range, but we did not in the time that we had. This dynamic will change as well, but the majority of the market at the time was to appeal to overseas investors. [Most] overseas investors were attracted [more to], according to [some developers we spoke to, a lot more to glitzy and glamorous amenity than the everyday features, so their focus was actually, ‘Oh, if the development next door to us is putting in a 50-metre pool, we’ve got to make it 60 metres’—that sort of mentality. That is the focus, so it is a bit—

Mr FOWLES: So there is a tension then between—the investment product, essentially a financial product—the purchasers of an investment product and the people who live in the building or live in that space. How do you think you resolve that tension in such a way that everyone still wins?

Mr HUYNH: So we went in creating our guidelines assuming that it would still be sold to investors. But what gets sold to investors is still a product that works really well or better than what it does now. So with the change that we came up with we absolutely tried to minimise costs, we absolutely tried to minimise area increases, so that these changes they could literally just take with them and say—and they said this to us when we presented to them the idea of having that study nook and just putting doors in front to turn it into a big storage cupboard—‘Oh yes, we love that idea. We’re keen to test it’. So those ideas are much easier for them to explore than asking, ‘Let’s actually add 6 square metres more to the unit’, because that has huge implications for their funding.

Ms SUNKARA: And with these two years in lockdown, we are not selling just to investors anymore; we have to sell them to our people. We need people to age in place. And there is migration and cultural shift.

People from many nations have lived in apartments, have grown up in apartments and want the same for their kids—not essentially everyone, but the developer’s mindset is inclined towards aging in place.

Mr HUYNH: Just to add a bit more context to that, although I did say the majority of them do target majority stock as investors, there is also this minority stock in a lot of these developments as well, especially in the city, which is to target more affluent domestic markets. In some cases they will cater to families with children. But that is not where the majority of [inner-city apartment-dwelling] families are living. So we wanted to adopt the mentality of, ‘We need to get it right at the baseline stock’.

Ms GARAY: I would also like to add to Derek’s point that we actually interviewed a real estate agent in Docklands as well, who informed us that I believe it was around—I will probably fix this up a little bit later—[90% of resale purchases were owner-occupiers - quoted from a director (real-estate agent) based in Docklands].

Mr FOWLES: Eighty per cent?

Ms GARAY: Yes. So this is not just appealing to the first investor, but it needs to appeal to whoever is going to take up that apartment later. However, we do also link this back to policy. So there is also the foreign investment cap of 50 per cent. Originally with the big developers they will have the 20 per cent capital and the 80 per cent foreign investment but because of the 50 per cent domestic cap, there is now this 30 per cent that they are going to have to do to appeal to the domestic market, and that is why we think that these guidelines are very important, because if they cannot appeal to a family—who are most likely the ones that will have that capital to buy an apartment—and if they do not have detached dwellings on option or townhouses or if a family want to just continue living in the city, then this is a new available form of housing for them. And we want it to work for that family.

Mr HUYNH: And I think that is going back to the very first question that Sarah asked: how much interest is there? I think it is a chicken-and-egg scenario here as well. Is there low interest just because a product has never been designed for them? Could that be really why the interest is not as high as it could be? And when we think back to that initial graph that Arianna showed, the number of families with children—the growth—will double in the next 30 years. Where are they all going to live?

Ms GARAY: Yes, and we know that is in established Melbourne as well.

The CHAIR: I find that quite interesting, because I think if you look at something like Airbnb it is a prime example. For families maybe like ours, when we go away with younger kids we no longer look at hotel rooms or motel rooms; we are looking at—

Ms SUNKARA: Homes.

The CHAIR: a bigger space because of that. It is very interesting.

Ms SUNKARA: Yes. You cannot ask for what you do not know.

Ms GREEN: I suppose Cindy and I are a different demographic to everyone else at the table. The other three members have got young children, but Cindy and I—well, we are not grandparents yet, but we are at that stage. I think that is the other part of the families market too; it is grandparents. Throughout the pandemic they missed their kids, they missed their grandchildren, but also there is now a fear of institutionalised child care and things like that because of the pandemic, and so I think that there will be even more grandparents looking after grandchildren. There is no reason why you would not have that, so the design principles for a family with kids would be the same for a grandparent because you would want the same sort of access. But also I think, in pitching to developers—and I know, because Sarah and I represent outer suburban communities, that when a new estate comes up you immediately see the family buyers and then the grandparents buying around the corner—and investors you say, ‘Well, look, you sell to one family member; you’re probably going to sell to both sets of grandparents’.

But the other thing is with dementia and things like that—and that is the other thing with the pandemic, people are so frightened about what has happened in aged care—having wintergardens and gymnasiums and things like that means that older people can stay fitter, and also if they become child like, they are going to use the

spaces that the children use. But also, in Australia one in three or one in four people will experience disability at some time in their life, whether they go in or out. It might be like Cindy, after a sporting accident or something, or it could be something permanent. But for investors to know that we have the national disability insurance scheme too, which supports people with disability to live and to work, that is also a market in terms of apartments. They will not necessarily want a big place to live and look after, but they will want something that has got good access, and they are still going to want the gym and the swimming pool and all that as well, and particularly in the CBD, because that is close to work. We now have a skill shortage, so we have finally got an opportunity to redress the imbalance in Australia, in that we have the lowest employment of people with disability in the OECD. Some of those people could be filling the skill shortage that we have now.

Ms GARAY: In addition to your point as well, one of the people we interviewed—I believe it was a paediatric nurse, or essentially a health specialist—also said that if you can design for children, you can design for senior living as well, which we hope will address that sort of question about ageing in place as well.

Ms SUNKARA: And downsizing.

Ms GARAY: And downsizing, that is right.

Ms SUNKARA: No-one wants to mow their lawns anymore—like, let the building manager do it.

Ms GREEN: Less investor vacancies.

Ms GARAY: Yes. I am sure you will love to drink coffee in your wintergarden once that is available.

Ms GREEN: Certainly. We will, won't we, Cindy?

Mr HAMER: You mentioned your pilot program and partnering with industry. Was that a theoretical exercise, or is there actually a building being developed in the Docklands on the principles that you have talked about?

Mr HUYNH: It was a building that was under planning, so we assessed the floor plans and the designs there. That was sort of the benchmark as a market product that we could look at. We used that to mark up the interventions and see how we could get it to work, and we then took that and actually presented it to the developer, the architect, and went through it all.

Mr HAMER: And obviously not wanting to breach any particular commercial status that it might have, have those been adopted in terms of the way that it is going forward—or you cannot share it or you do not know it?

Mr HUYNH: I cannot share it at this point in time.

Mr HAMER: No worries. My other question was sort of relating to Will's point about what is preventing this from happening now, particularly some of the low-hanging fruit. You have obviously done a lot of international research and looked at a lot of other cities, and I guess I was wondering what they have done. Is it a prescriptive approach—not necessarily in the specifics but in the generalities; in these cities that have a large amount of stock of child-friendly apartments, has that happened purely because of the demand and it has been driven by the market, or did they put in place quite early some prescriptive measures? I guess it is something for the committee to take on in terms of looking at how some of those measures could be implemented, whether it is that balance of market driven versus regulatory.

Ms GARAY: Yes. We will take part of that question on notice because we will have to look back into our initial look into it, but I do remember from the Toronto guidelines that really came because they are trying to increase density within their neighbourhoods and not continue to build out, because of the infrastructure costs and all the difficulties in providing that. But also, in general it was very much a waterfall process, which is why we really wanted to change the way we did ours, with agile methodology and continuing to touch base with people. They did essentially just, I believe, interview parents and just take those consultation results and implement those into their guidelines.

Mr HUYNH: I guess, in touching on Arianna's point, what we found was that a lot of those guidelines were based on them asking parents what their current situation is. So to go back to your question, the parents are

probably already living in apartments, and the guidelines were based on that rather than them coming up with it and then that being the driver for more people to adopt apartment living.

Mr HAMER: Yes, and many of the cities that you identified already have a much higher level of apartment living than Melbourne does.

Mr HUYNH: Not all of them, but several of them do.

Ms GARAY: Or at least low-scale, six-storey or eight-storey sort of like podium developments.

Ms SUNKARA: Much inclined towards market driven.

Mr HAMER: What was that, sorry?

Ms SUNKARA: Market driven, like migration in Toronto especially.

Mr HAMER: And Vancouver has a lot. Yes.

Ms SUNKARA: Yes, Vancouver.

The CHAIR: Look, I am going to throw it open so if there are any other members that want to ask any other questions—Cindy, did you have any other questions?

Ms McLEISH: One of the things that I have seen in other countries, and you talked about the six- to eight-storey-sized dwellings now, we have got these 50-storey and you do have a few lower ones. Are the lower ones much more family friendly or are they all the same?

Ms GARAY: This is very interesting because you will have to break down the case studies, but essentially in Melbourne we have those podium tower developments. I would say it is almost somewhat non-comparable because their lower ones were always just essentially up to six to eight storeys, so we will have to look at those floorplans. I do not think we really aimed to have our guidelines be applicable to theirs [of international examples]. What we really wanted to do was put it in the Victorian context and really address the floorplans that will come out of the current designs coming out of Victoria.

Ms McLEISH: Nathan was on an inquiry with me a number of years ago, and we went to Vancouver. The other thing that I really noticed that I really liked was that the buildings themselves were set back and they were sort of tiered a little bit, so they were not just vertical. It looked from the street that they were not sheer and they actually probably had, when you looked up, greater garden space and things like that on a couple of levels that were set back. It was one of the things that I said to Nathan the other day absolutely stuck with me from that inquiry. I could see that actually having much greater outdoor space and being much more family friendly.

Ms GARAY: Yes. Those are ziggurat forms, as I know that the industry sort of calls them. I think the difficulty really with those is that our development context is very different from their development context. If you do look through their streets and their grids and spaces, you will find that quite often sites are as large as 4000 to 6000 square metres, which will allow them to build that and have a courtyard in between to separate the next podium over. However, we have to look again at the Victorian context and the lot sizes that are available here, which are around 2000 square metres—not to mention as well their streets [international context] are quite wide. If you are looking at the City of Melbourne streets, we only have very few wide streets.

Ms McLEISH: Yes, thank you.

Mr HUYNH: I think, in going to your question, it depends on how you would like to measure what is better and what is worse and what aspects of a development and how that is ranked. The larger the scale of the development the larger the communal spaces that it can afford, so quite generally the really large developments of a few hundred units, such as those close to the city, would have a lot more communal area. But is communal area what we are really considering beneficial in these spaces or is it the units themselves? It is sort of weighing that up, isn't it, but also thinking automatically if you are going to live in a tower, regardless of the design of the building, really, the surrounding buildings and the context you are living in, already that is less daylight, less access to fresh air. Especially if you are on a high level, it actually gets really windy, so it is even more dangerous to have balconies, for example. That is part of why we explored winter gardens, because we actually

found that it was not just a win for children, it was actually better amenity generally for families living up higher. I think there has already started to be talk or guidelines about enforcing or encouraging winter gardens to be provided in lieu of balconies once you are above 20 floors. The scale of the developments and the height actually already play into a lot of factors of amenity and livability of units and then the design itself. It really depends on the place and the market. So yes, the developers and the architects who work in the space of larger developments in the city would be very different to those working in the outer areas. But that is actually driven by thinking about who they are targeting. So from our research—and I could be wrong here, because I have not spent a lot of time just focusing on this thing—with the larger developments that are based in the city, they are targeting more international and foreign investors. Because that is what they think: ‘I’m going to invest in a unit in Melbourne. If I’m overseas, it’s got to be near the city. It can’t be this random suburb 20, 30, 40 k’s away’. So that plays into the mentality and intent and changes what they incentivise and encourage to allocate into their units and the communal spaces.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Cindy. Do members have any other questions as we wrap up? The next group arrived about 15 minutes ago.

Ms GREEN: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: It is really interesting stuff.

Ms GARAY: We are happy to take more questions. You can contact us.

Ms GREEN: Fabulous alumni. I am not a Uni of Melbourne alumnus, but I used to work at UMPA, the University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association, and I just think the way you are putting back is just remarkable.

Ms GARAY: We are indeed proud of our alumni network, but it does not just consist of the University of Melbourne. Although it is supported by the University of Melbourne, our alumni network sort of runs independently of that. So we do have other alumni, like, you know, people that attend our events that are not just specifically of the University of Melbourne. And I think that is the beauty of the Ignite network. We are not just a thought leadership sort of holistic-looking group, but we are also not specifically a research-driven for two years to five years sort of group. We really want to be in that in-between space where we are in our industries, we are learning in work, and we are applying that as a lens in this sort of multidisciplinary approach to do interdisciplinary processes.

Ms GREEN: Well, it is great for us in this inquiry.

The CHAIR: A lot of good work you are doing. I think it is an exciting space to be in, to be honest.

Ms GARAY: Yes. It is.

Mr FOWLES: Thanks, guys.

Witnesses withdrew.