

Brougham St Cohousing: Housing for Environmental Sustainability, Climate Adaptation and Resilience

Our speaker for May, Teresa Dominik, has been involved in cohousing for more than a decade, both personally and professionally. Her interest in cohousing arose when she saw how important social connection and community was in maintaining the mental and physical health of South Africans during the apartheid years.

Cohousing has been described as Housing with Benefits. Features of this housing model include:

- a blend of private homes with shared spaces
- designed for social interaction and community life
- co-designed with and for residents
- collectively managed by and for residents
- resource sharing to spend less but access more
- a good neighbour to the surrounding neighbourhood

The physical features of the Brougham St cohousing project, due to be completed early 2027, consist of a 1.6 acre property in Eltham with Diamond Creek frontage, as well as 25 year old café and shop buildings from Lilies on Brougham, and heritage listed mudbrick studio and shed. These older buildings have been retained as communal space. 29% of the site is in an Urban Flood Zone, and the site carries with it a Bushfire Overlay as well as an Environmental and Landscape Overlay.

The Brougham St cohousing project is intergenerational, comprising 20 households which are also the developers. Homes have a small footprint but are built to a high standard with high environmental performance. There is only 22% site coverage – reduced dwelling size allows for shared communal storage, recreation areas, garden sheds and workshops for sharing tools and equipment. This arrangement promotes social interaction and lower material consumption.

The communal open space provides opportunities for shared waste, water and energy infrastructure as well as communal gardens and possibilities for biodiversity invigoration. A proposed key project is the construction of a wetland.

The original hope was to restrict car parking to the perimeter, as it was felt that car parking provision often works against other more important social and environmental outcomes, but the community was required by council to provide more car spaces than they wanted. There are pedestrian pathways throughout the site, encouraging shared vehicles and a greater focus on active transport.

Environmentally sustainable design is a key feature of the project, and solar panels and battery storage have been incorporated into the design through coordinated, community-led decision making. This planning at a collective scale facilitates enhanced energy independence and climate resilience while lowering greenhouse gas emissions and long-term energy costs. The reduced reliance on centralised energy

systems creates resilience to power outages and extreme weather events. Shared costs and decision-making make it more viable to implement shared solar and battery installations.

Community values are key. People who are drawn to cohousing have a certain mindset, including a care mindset, a culture of connection, a commitment to stewardship and an interest in how we can live an authentic life that respects the land we live on.

Social influence and pro-environmental behaviour is facilitated through shared decision-making and knowledge exchange, which distributes the practical and cognitive burden of environmentally responsible living and creates long-term behavioural change.

The communal design intentionally fosters social connection, building social capital among residents. This is critical in times of extreme events, where strong social networks can mean the difference between literal life and death. There is evidence indicating that social connectedness reduces mortality during extreme heat events. This feature is particularly important for vulnerable residents.

On a practical level, connected communities are well placed to develop local emergency plans and disaster response procedures.

The entire collective process is driven by good governance structure. Collective decision-making is in the form of separate but interconnected groups managing different areas of the project, including Building and Grounds, Finance and Legal, Design and Build, recruitment, Governance etc. In addition there are several working groups such as Solar Working Group, Emergency Management, Garden, Owners Corporation etc.

As Teresa concluded, it will be interesting to see how things pan out when the building works are finished and the community is finally living together!

Resources:

[Cohousing Australia](#) Committed to accelerating a shift towards housing that is developed and governed through community-led, participatory processes.

[Brougham St Cohousing](#) Where Earth, Heart and Village share a table