Australian state government's rationale for demolition of public housing debunked by refurbishment proposal

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A recent report issued by a group of independent architects proved that 44 high rise public housing towers in Melbourne can be refurbished to provide quality public housing.

The report represents a devastating indictment of the Victorian Labor government, which has claimed that total demolition is the only possible response to deteriorating conditions in the 6,600 apartments. Some 10,000 residents are impacted by the government's plan, which is slated to begin early this year.

Simon Newport, chief executive of Homes Victoria—the government body tasked with demolishing the towers—has claimed that any attempt to refurbish the towers would be like "putting lipstick on a pig."

Newport made unsubstantiated claims that it would cost $2.3 billion over 20 years just to maintain the existing towers in their current condition. The Homes Victoria (HV) website asserts: "The towers fail against noise, sustainability, waste and recycling, bedroom area dimensions, room depth, ventilation, private open space, accessibility and minimum amenity standards."

State Labor Premier Jacinta Allan similarly said last September: "Our public housing towers need to be demolished and replaced. You only need to look at these images [of the buildings] to understand why… Almost every concrete wall in these old towers is load-bearing—unable to be widened, opened or moved… These buildings are concrete remnants of a time over 50 years back."

These claims are nothing but self-serving lies. The Labor government's demolition plans are directly aimed at boosting property investor profits by semi-privatising the construction of new apartment blocks on the lucrative, inner-city sites on which the public housing towers have stood for decades. Two-thirds of the new apartments will be sold as private units for profit, while the minority will be leased not as public housing but rather "social housing," which is more expensive and less secure for vulnerable residents.

The government has dismissed out of hand the possibility of refurbishing the existing public housing towers. This is despite the meticulous research contained within a report that was issued by OFFICE Architects, a not-for-profit design and research practice. Titled "Retain Repair Reinvest – Flemington Estate: Feasibility Study and Alternative Design Proposal," it presented an alternative proposal to keep the existing towers and add the same number of new units as the government plan, but at a far lower cost.

The171-page report is both detailed and professional. It marshals the largely pro-bono expertise of architects, landscape architects, structural engineers, ESD engineers, quantity surveyors, building surveyors, researchers and photographers.

The report focussed on four towers in the inner-north Melbourne suburb of Flemington, which are among those initially slated for demolition.

The government's proposal for the demolition of four towers at the Flemington estate and construction of 1,297 new apartments and commercial space is costed at $651 million. An additional $228 million is needed to re-house the residents for the multi-year duration of the demolition and reconstruction project. That is a total of $879 million, or $677,000 per apartment.

The OFFICE Architects report presented a detailed alternative that it called Retain Repair Reinvest (RRR). This would involve refurbishing the existing 720 apartments and building 577 new apartments, for a total of $519 million or $400,000 per apartment.

The RRR proposal means that residents would not have

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to move off the estate but could be housed in apartments on the estate. In one proposed option, five storeys of each tower would be refurbished at a time, causing minimal disruption to residents' lives in terms of schooling, medical access and community engagement.

The RRR proposal carefully and methodically addresses all the issues that the government has used to justify the demolition of the towers. The proposal examined in detail one estate in Flemington that has four near-identical towers of 21 storeys each, with nine flats per level above ground, a total of 720 two- and three-bedroom flats.

OFFICE Architects selected one of the four blocks on the Flemington Estate, 120 Racecourse Road, as their prototype. The architects' refurbishment design proposal is highly detailed and includes "bolting on" balconies up the entire east and west façades of the towers, giving residents private outdoor space and solving the problem of the current poorly insulated pre-cast panel walls. Air conditioners are proposed for each living area to address one of the main issues facing residents now—their flats being too hot in summer and too cold in winter.

Internally each flat would get a new kitchen and bathroom fit-out, and wider corridors and doorways to bring most rooms up to current accessibility standards. New double-glazed openable windows and doors would replace all the existing fittings. At the ground level of each tower, five additional two-bedroom units would be added to be fully accessible for residents with mobility needs.

Surveys of tower residents have shown that they value the comparatively large existing room sizes. New low-rise social housing apartments nearby are disliked by residents as the room sizes are smaller—some residents relocated there were advised by Homes Victoria to put their kitchen tables on balconies as they didn't fit inside the new kitchens.

Homes Victoria claims that the towers are structurally inadequate and do not meet the current earthquake code. The RRR structural engineers have detailed a methodology to strengthen the small areas of the structure with bolt-through metal plates or carbon fibre reinforcing.

As well as the refurbishment of the 720 existing flats in the four existing towers, the RRR proposal adds 577 new dwellings that could be built on existing ground level carparking areas that occupy a large proportion of the existing site.

By contrast, the government's plan includes the demolition of all four towers and the construction of 1,297 new apartments, while at the same time developing 9,302 square metres of new two storey commercial space along the Racecourse Road frontage. Public housing land will be used for offices or shops that may be sold or leased for profit while creating no benefit for the residents.

Another reason to refurbish rather than demolish the towers is the carbon emissions involved in new construction. The RRR report quoted a UN study that states, "Globally, the building and construction industry is accountable for 39 per cent of the world's carbon emissions. 28 per cent of this relates to the operation of the buildings and the remaining 11 per cent resulting from the manufacturing of new materials such as steel, cement and glass." Retaining the existing towers will substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The OFFICE Architects report was developed in the face of intense Labor government secrecy. At every step the authors met a brick wall in trying to gain access to reports and designs commissioned by the government. They only had access to publicly available documents, and therefore used conservative assumptions where necessary throughout the RRR report. Their findings likely understate the real costs of the government's privatisation drive.

Public housing towers built in the post-war period and now needing modernisation are a worldwide phenomenon. By detailing examples of such successful refurbishment of very similar buildings in Scotland, Switzerland, England and Germany, the RRR report presented a snapshot of what is possible and easily achievable at the Flemington estate and for the other high rise towers slated for destruction.

The Labor government of Premier Allan is aggressively proceeding despite the OFFICE Architects report because rational calculations as to what is the most cost-effective way of improving the lives of public housing residents play no role whatsoever in its plans. Its agenda is to effectively destroy public housing and hand over plum inner-city sites to private developers as a mechanism to generate profit and wealth for the banks and property corporations whose interests the Labor Party serves.

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