

# Architect explains why Australian public housing towers should be fixed, not demolished

**Our reporters**  
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The Victorian Labor government is pressing ahead with its destruction of 44 public housing towers in the state capital of Melbourne. In a number of the towers, residents have already been displaced, and demolition works are being prepared.

The policy is a massive assault on the working class, dictated entirely by the interests of property developers. Poor and vulnerable layers are being thrown out of their homes, while prime inner city locations are being turned over to rapacious corporate interests. This is a continuation and deepening of a nationwide assault on public housing over decades.

In a cynical attempt to justify what amounts to social cleansing, Labor has claimed that the towers are not habitable and must be demolished. That lie has been opposed by residents, including those who have joined the Neighbourhood Action Committee, a rank-and-file group of residents and workers initiated by the Socialist Equality Party to fight the demolitions.

As part of this struggle, the WSWs recently spoke to architect Simon Robinson of the OFFICE group. It produced a comprehensive report, establishing that refurbishment of the towers is a viable option, and thus refuting a central pretext for the attack on public housing residents.

WSWS: The OFFICE report “Retain Repair Reinvest: Flemington Estate: Feasibility Study and Alternative Design Proposal” presented an alternative proposal to the Labor government’s plans to demolish Melbourne’s 44 public housing towers. Can you explain how this research evolved?

Simon Robinson (SR): OFFICE is structured as a not-for-profit. We’re a registered charity and a registered architectural practice. This means whatever we do is legally bound by our constitution as being for the public good. We’re interested in practising in a different way and using a not-for-profit structure and specifically the legal constitution as a way to guide us through what kind of projects we do.

We researched the public housing renewal programs and quickly realised the government was going ahead with the demolition and rebuild strategy, but not looking at refurbishment as a way to renew these estates.

I don’t think there is enough assistance to vulnerable communities in these types of fights. I think the work we and the consultants helping us out do, it’s important to put it into language the government understands and producing evidence that can be held up in public housing inquiries or in court. We’re using our skill set in a way that can help residents then campaign and advocate for themselves.

We did a study on Waterloo [Sydney’s biggest public housing estate]. We received some funding from the City of Sydney to look at refurbishment infill up there and worked with the local residents but also architects who have been involved in that community for the last 10 years. Again, we found similar findings that the buildings can be brought up to contemporary standards. We can include increased density on this site by

doing infill development while avoiding the displacement of those communities.

We took it upon ourselves to start to do refurbishment studies that could show there’s a different way to renew public housing estates and avoid relocating residents. The project has three key objectives. The first is to retain existing residents which is the main point of it. We’re trying to avoid the relocation of residents because we know how much harm that causes. Secondly to repair the existing buildings to reduce the environmental impact. We’re in a climate crisis. We should start thinking about retrofit as a way to minimise harm to the environment. The third point is reinvest. Initially the land was being given to the developers, but now it’s being leased to a consortium, but the proposed tenure type is still the same. Public housing is getting replaced with a mixture of private affordable and community housing.

So reinvest is to put any savings back into public housing. We see public housing as important for the state. We also think there’s a role for community housing providers, as well for affordable housing, but I think public housing is really key for addressing the housing crisis we’re in and providing housing options for people in pretty dire circumstances. There needs to be more investment into public housing in this state.

WSWS: You said that four years ago the government was already looking towards replacement rather than refurbishment.

SR: Officially it started in 2016 through the Public Housing Renewal Program (PHRP) which identified nine low rise estates. These were estates with three-storey walk-up buildings of which Ascot Vale is one. Then the Big Housing Build (BHB) announcement in 2021. Some of those nine estates identified in the PHRP got morphed into the BHB. Most recently the High-Rise Redevelopment Program (HRRP) where [Victorian Labor Premier] Dan Andrews announced the demolition of all 44 towers throughout Melbourne and then resigned three days later.

While there’s no transparency on how the HRRP will be rolled out we understand it’s going to be mixture of the Ground Lease Model so leasing the land for 40 years to a private consortium made up of a developer, a builder, a community housing provider. With each program, the government is aware of a lot of the criticism. The biggest criticism of the 2016 PHRP was they were either selling the land or giving the land to private developers. The Ground Lease Model was an attempt for them to say, we’re going to lease and after 40 years we get the buildings and the land back. In what condition those buildings and land are in, and what the politics are in 40 years time, no one really knows.

WSWS: Simon Newport CEO of Homes Victoria claimed that any attempt to refurbish the towers would be like “putting lipstick on a pig”...

SR: The issue with the announcement of the demolition of all 44 towers is it’s a blanket statement. It’s saying all the 44 towers are exactly the same, in exactly the same condition and have exactly the same issues.

We're not saying that the towers don't have issues. Part of our work is to say through refurbishment can we bring them up to contemporary standards? But to say they all have the same issues is just wrong.

In our studies we found the existing buildings do meet some of the things that Newport's saying they don't. And through refurbishment we can meet all the contemporary apartment guidelines, as well as services issues and maintenance issues as well.

The red brick towers that have been demolished already, one of the key reasons that they were demolishing those is because of the sewer stacks failing. Mid last year the government released an open tender to fix up the sewer stacks on all the other towers as well. So the release of that tender shows that it is possible to fix these things and they're going to be spending money on it. A lot of the reasons that these towers are deemed to be beyond repair could potentially be fixed through investment and refurbishment.

The one report that was released under FOI on the red brick towers referred to door widths and ceiling heights. But these things aren't actually non-compliant, they just don't meet the current Better Apartment Design guidelines which are recommendations rather than code. If we were to adhere to those, most buildings in Melbourne would have to be demolished.

WSWS: Do you think they looked at refurbishment or they excluded that as an option?

SR: I'm sure they would have thought about it but how far I'm not too sure. Our understanding is they got a lot of their recommendations off the Property Council and the building industry. Both of those are risk averse. There is a risk with refurbishing existing buildings—things like asbestos, structural condition, just unknown costs but you can reduce that risk by doing thorough investigations. Without thorough investigations I don't think the building industry would promote refurbishment because they're not thinking about the cost to residents, their health and wellbeing, the cost to the environment through carbon emissions and all those things.

They're just looking at delivery time and potentially costs and creation of jobs. And when you think about it in that narrow perspective it favours a demolition / rebuild proposal. Whereas we're saying there's all these other things that are linked and most importantly they're homes to really vulnerable people. Currently there's 10,000 residents in these apartments, and we assume more because there is overcrowding in some apartments, and their health and well-being should come at the forefront of any proposal.

Through demolition / rebuild there's no way to avoid relocation of residents away from their communities, which has huge impact to these people.

WSWS: One issue that the residents have raised with us is the structural integrity of the towers that the government claims fail in terms of earthquake codes.

SR: We engaged a structural engineer to look at the structural drawings of one of the towers. When you run the seismic loading requirements simulating if an earthquake hit Melbourne the buildings would withstand that.

What they don't meet is current construction requirements. A way to upgrade these to contemporary building construction methods is to put in new connection plates. So whether or not the buildings are dangerous in the condition that they are in we're not sure. But if the government knew that and didn't release that report that's obviously very problematic. But what we do know is that there are ways to upgrade them to meet structural code compliance in today's standards as well.

From our understanding and the work of the structural engineer, if an earthquake was to happen, they wouldn't fall down. You have to assume that that is the case because if the government knew that if an earthquake happened and they would fall down then that's putting a lot of lives in danger.

Our position in all of this is not saying that no building should be demolished. It's saying that appropriate investigations should be undertaken where you're looking at two responses—one is refurbishment and one is demolition / rebuild—holding those against each other with the residents at the forefront.

WSWS: Your report explains that it was developed in the face of intense government secrecy. Can you give us some examples of the government secrecy and what conclusions you draw from this behaviour?

SR: We put in a series of Freedom of Information Requests and got denied on all of them. Some of the things that we were asking were for the architectural plans, so not secret information. A lot of the information we're asking for such as maintenance records or structural records were also denied. A lot of denials were based on "commercial-in-confidence."

Architects working on these projects have to sign non-disclosure contracts. There are a lot of rumours around that the buildings aren't structurally sound. Architects and engineers are happy to say these things without producing any evidence but they're not allowed to talk about their involvement in the demolition of these buildings or what's being proposed in their place.

That's the same with Homes Victoria and Simon Newport's evidence in court and at the inquiry. Whenever they are asked, can you elaborate or produce the documents that show refurbishment is not possible, they say, "oh no, it's cabinet-in-confidence," but they're more than willing to talk about why the demolition is the only approach.

WSWS: OFFICE made a submission to the Victorian Parliamentary inquiry which handed down its findings in December 2025. Can you comment on your participation in the inquiry in the light of the report?

SR: Our report got referenced a lot in other people's submissions and I think that's the reality of it sitting within a vacuum of information. It shows it's worth in terms of being a useful thing that we have done to change the conversation.

We gave evidence based on our report. Because we had something that could be questioned, we were questioned. Things like how many bolts were being proposed by the structural engineer to be drilled through some of the structural plates? Where would the residents get relocated through our proposals? The release of the report is great to have this on record and the findings support everything that we and others have been promoting.

What it will do and achieve I don't have high hopes. The government doesn't have to take on board the recommendations. And I don't think they will take them on board. [Housing] Minister [Harriet] Shing immediately after the release of the report, went on the radio and said it's business as usual and they're going ahead with it.

WSWS: What is your estimation of the motives behind the government's refusal to consider refurbishment of the towers despite all the reasons you have explained?

SR: Unfortunately, it appears that the government no longer wants to supply and manage public housing. Like so much of our public infrastructure the provision of homes is being handed over to the private sector and the government is relieved of its responsibility. It is something we have found through the release of four reports, that it doesn't matter how much evidence is produced if the government doesn't want to do it, they won't. And this is clear, we've put forward alternatives that are supported by the residents, cheaper to deliver and will avoid huge social and environmental damage yet public housing estates are still being demolished.



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