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A place to call home

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A new approach to sustainable living is paving the way to a better life for a group of Melbourne's most vulnerable residents.



Credit: Grocon Group

On any given night in Victoria, more than 20,000 people are homeless. Now, a \$46 million project funded by the Victorian state and the federal governments is going some way to address the myriad of problems faced by those who are homeless, or at risk, in Melbourne.

The outcome of this investment is an 11-storey apartment building providing supported housing for up to 131 tenants in Melbourne's CBD, as well as affordable housing for a further 30 at risk or low-income tenants. The building is styled after the Common Ground supportive housing model, which was pioneered and refined in New York.

'The building houses medical, employment and counselling services, so tenants can access the help they need under one roof and avoid the challenges of making and keeping appointments across the city,' explains Ms Jane Wilson, the Corporate and Government Affairs Manager at construction company Grocon.

The idea is that homelessness is not simply a result of housing availability problems, but has several other driving factors, including unemployment, mental health issues, family breakdown, violence and substance abuse. To help address these issues, Melbourne's Common Ground includes a library, medical centre, conference room and an art therapy room. A 24-h concierge and state-of-the-art security create a sense of safety for residents who have often lived in highly unsafe environments. All these aspects help to build a sense of community, a cornerstone of the supported-housing model.

Since 2007, New York's Common Ground has been working to incorporate 'green' design principles into all residences, and this also fits well with the aims of the Melbourne partners.

'As far as Grocon is concerned, we don't want to build anything below a 5-star building anymore,' says Ms Wilson. 'Sustainability is one of our core values.'

The company partnered with HomeGround, Yarra Community Housing, and the Victorian Property Fund to develop the project, but donated their contribution on a ‘no profit, zero margin’ basis.

Energy-saving features in the finished product – a ‘5-green star’ rated building –include an internal atrium that ventilates apartments, and a green roof that provides insulation for the building. The green roof is also becoming an important therapeutic space and communal garden. For tenants, these features translate into a weekly saving of around \$10.40. ‘That doesn’t sound like a lot to me or you,’ Ms Wilson explains, ‘but that’s a lot for our client group.’

Sustainability at Elizabeth Street Common Ground

- Rain harvesting for collection and reuse
- Natural ventilation via central atrium that draws fresh air into every apartment
- Double glazing
- Hydronic heating
- Solar boosting to hot water system
- Greywater recycling
- Smart electrical meters that display energy use in each apartment
- Lighting control systems and motion sensor lighting
- On and off switches for each apartment



Inside one of the Elizabeth Street apartments. HomeGround Services

When the Elizabeth Street Common Ground building opened its doors in August 2010, HomeGround – the support organisation charged with placing tenants – received so many referrals they could have filled another three buildings of the same size. There are also plans for new Common Ground buildings in Brisbane and Sydney, where homelessness is also a significant problem.

According to Mr Stephen Nash, CEO of HomeGround Services, the new tenants are settling in well. ‘They’re amazed at having such a quality home, and impressed with the high standard of the building,’ he says.

‘When I meet tenants I’m constantly reminded of both the terrible impact that homelessness has had on them and the profound effect of gaining a permanent home. Elizabeth Street Common Ground has already provided a great example of the amazing impact that safe, quality, permanent housing and support can have on the lives of vulnerable people.’

More information:

Homeground: www.homeground.org.au

Green Star: www.gbca.org.au/green-star/green-star-overview

Elizabeth Street Common Ground: www.elizabethstcgsh.org.au/partners.htm

Grocon Construction: www.grocon.com.au

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