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Bridging Individual and Community Needs: The Story Behind the Success of Australia's First Co-Funded Inner Urban Co-Housing Development

Alex Fearnside
Urban Coup

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PRACTICE NOTE

BRIDGING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY NEEDS: THE STORY BEHIND THE SUCCESS OF AUSTRALIA'S FIRST CO-FUNDED INNER URBAN CO-HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

ALEX FEARNSIDE*

Abstract

This practice note describes Urban Coup's journey, Australia's first privately funded, inner urban co-housing development. This journey commenced in March 2008 and in June 2022 we moved into our new homes in Brunswick, Melbourne. Over these 14 years, we collaborated to create a co-housing community of 29 homes, guided by our shared vision of sustainability, affordability, and connection.

By emphasising the importance of strong relationships, shared vision, and effective communication, this practice note offers valuable insights for individuals and groups seeking to create co-housing developments and achieve community goals.

I INTRODUCTION

Urban Coup¹ is Australia's first privately funded, inner urban co-housing² development. This journey started in March 2008 when about 20 people gathered in Melbourne to discuss developing and living in homes that were more sustainable, affordable and connected than the housing options that were available at the time.³ In June 2022, our building was completed and just

* Urban Coup co-initiator and resident.

¹ 'Urban Coup' refers to the building we live in, the people who live there call ourselves 'Urban Coupers'.

² Co-housing is an intentional community of private homes clustered around shared spaces. Originating in Denmark in the late 1960s, each home has traditional amenities, and a range of shared spaces typically feature a common house with a large kitchen, dining area, laundry, and recreational spaces. Co-housing fosters interaction, providing social, practical, economic, and environmental benefits.

³ In 2008, housing options in Melbourne were typically new dwellings on the outskirts of Melbourne that were isolated and heavily reliant on private transport, apartments located closer to the centre of the city that did not connect residents, or existing homes closer to the city that were expensive or needed renovating or both.

over 50 people moved into 29 homes in an eight-story apartment building in Brunswick, Melbourne. We were finally living in a co-housing development that we co-funded and co-designed.

Over this journey we learnt to make decisions collectively, embraced compromise, and took financial risks together. We also contracted a developer, purchased land, secured funding, and had our homes built. Not a simple task, particularly when you add in 50 individuals' needs regarding their homes and shared spaces, and the Urban Coup community's need for a development that was sustainable, affordable and connected.

II URBAN COUP

Urban Coup is in Brunswick, Melbourne and is home to a diverse and vibrant community of about 45 adults, four teenagers, three children, six cats and three dogs who live in 29 apartments in an eight-storey building. Urban Coup refers to the building and the people who live there are known as Urban Coupers.

Our collective journey was envisioned in three phases: the first was to form community and secure land, the second was to design and have our homes and community spaces⁴ built, and the third was to live in community. The first two phases were guided by our vision to 'be a resilient, positive, and diverse community that contributes to a healthier world and one that enriches its residents' lives'.⁵ During the first phase, we established The Urban Coup Inc.,⁵ an association incorporated in Victoria; developed our decision making⁶ process; finalised our design brief; and recruited Urban Coupers, who typically found out about Urban Coup through word of mouth, our website, and various events that we ran.

We chose not to screen people who wanted to join The Urban Coup Inc, which meant that anyone could join provided they supported the vision, mission and values, committed to our decision-making process, and paid a non-refundable membership fee.

In the second phase, we partnered with a developer, established a trust to allow Urban Coupers to co-fund the project, engaged our architects, purchased land, secured planning and building approval, undertook the home allocation process, appointed a builder, signed contracts of sale for our homes, had our homes built and moved in. Throughout the first two phases of this project, Urban Coupers collectively invested more than:

⁴ Urban Coup has over 500m² of internal communal space, including a kitchen and dining room where we can prepare and share a meal together, music and guest rooms, a bathhouse, and a workshop. It also has over 500m² of shared outdoor space, including a BBQ area, outdoor seating, and beautiful gardens.

⁵ The Urban Coup Inc was established to manage membership and enable us to contract with the developer.

⁶ Urban Coup developed a modified consensus decision making process, which in seeks consensus from everyone for a decision, and includes a means to go to a 75% majority vote if consensus cannot be achieved.

- 10,000 hours working together to define and support the project;
- 3,000 hours collaborating with the architects to design a building that connects and supports everyone;
- \$3.5 million to co-fund the project, which was about one quarter of the project's overall cost.

At the time of writing (2024), the Urban Coupers have been living in community for almost two and a half years.

III STRENGTHENING INDIVIDUALS AND THE COMMUNITY

Among the Urban Coupers there was an acknowledgement that we didn't have the skills required to thrive in community. To address this problem, we committed to strengthening our communication and conflict resolution skills, which we did by participating in the following programs:

- Partnership Solutions' Non-Violent Communication programs, in which many of us participated in 2014;
- The Alternatives to Violence Project's workshop in Non-Violent Conflict Resolution, in which many of us participated in 2016.

These programs deepened individual skills which strengthened the community and complimented a range of other activities that supported getting to know and trust each other, including:

- Sharing meals;
- Working together to develop policies and procedures;
- Attending regular workshops and gatherings;
- Participating in activities that allowed us to share our fears and concerns;
- Celebrating progress, even a small step forward such as finalising the pets policy.⁷

Our individual and collective journeys took each of us to places we had never imagined, including deep and sometimes painful growth, joyful and occasionally gritty interactions, profound connections, and ultimately the thrill of achieving our dream of living in a co-housing community.

IV BRIDGING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY NEEDS DURING THE HOME ALLOCATION PROCESS

The home allocation process presented the first time where the challenge of accommodating individual needs had the potential to derail the project. In terms of the overall project, the home allocation process happened in phase two – after planning approval was achieved and before individuals signed the contract of sale for their home. Having signed contracts for all the homes was required to obtain building finance, which enabled our homes to be built.

⁷ The pets policy documents the responsibilities of the pet's owner in regard to pets in common areas, noise from pets and the like.

Examples of the individual and community needs in the home allocation process are:

- Individual needs
 - Getting the best possible home within your budget constraints.
 - Accepting that some Urban Coupers who were choosing before you had not contributed as much as you had.
- Community needs
 - For everyone to select a home that met their needs, there was a material risk that people would leave the project if this wasn't achieved.

It was mathematically possible to allocate all homes, but to successfully achieve this we needed to understand each other's constraints and needs, and to create an emotional and physical space where it was possible to prioritise needs and manage wants and desires.

It was also necessary to include the following considerations:

- Some homes had better amenity than others, e.g. more daylight, closer to shared facilities;
- Budgets, e.g. individuals had different budgets and for some there were only one or two homes in their respective queue that they could afford;⁸
- Medical, e.g. access to sunlight, accessible bathrooms.

With the above in mind, we developed the home allocation process, which was consented to by everyone directly involved. This process:

- Confirmed that an individual's place in a queue was based on the date they joined The Urban Coup Inc rather than the amount of time or skills contributed, that is Urban Coupers who joined earlier, picked earlier and vice-versa;
- Consisted of four queues based on the individual's chosen number of bedrooms. The number of available one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom homes was equal to the number of individuals in each queue and people couldn't change queues;⁹
- Included breaks in the workshop for contemplation, time out if requested, and mediation if agreed to by the individuals seeking resolution to an impasse.

The full process is provided at Appendix One, details of the mediation process and clarifying conversations is provided at Appendix Two. With an agreed process, we approached the home allocation workshop with a mix of trepidation and excitement.

⁸ The price per metre squared for each apartment was different and was set according to the level (1 to 7) and side (North or South) of the building where it was located. In summary, the top North apartments were 10% more expensive than the bottom South apartments per metre squared.

⁹ There are a total of 29 apartments - two have four bedrooms, five have three bedrooms, 16 have two bedrooms and six have one bedroom.

The first workshop took place in April 2018 and commenced with a series of activities to break the ice and create a safe emotional space for the day. We then proceeded with the home allocation process and successfully allocated all the four-, three- and one-bedroom homes.

We then broke for a potluck lunch and following the meal we moved on to the two-bedroom queue. This queue was intrinsically more complex, not just because of the large number of homes being allocated, but also due to a wide gap in price, variation in amenity, and a variety of different individual needs.

During the allocation of the two-bedroom homes, we called on the services of the mediator twice, which helped individuals to address their concerns and move forward. We took several timeouts to recentre, and towards the end of the available time there was a break from process and two households swapped homes, which meant that we had found a workable solution.

However, during the three-day review period, it was clear the break in process had disadvantaged some individuals and we chose to re-run the allocation for the two-bedroom homes. The re-run was focused, generous and ultimately successful, which can be attributed to the generosity of the individuals, the cohesion in the community, the skills of the facilitator and mediator. This process was also informed by Landmark Worldwide's "Five Aspects of Accomplishment."¹⁰ In relation to the latter, specifically:

- We maintained and, in some cases, strengthened our *relatedness* with each other by sharing our needs and understanding other's needs, which allowed people to choose homes and avoid disadvantaging others;
- By sharing our specific requirements and limitations we maintained the *possibility* of living in a resilient community;
- There were enough homes to choose from, so there were sufficient *opportunities* available;
- By following the process as it was designed, we also ensure that sufficient *actions* were taken to successfully complete the home allocation process;
- We managed *completion* at the beginning of the session by providing the opportunity for everyone to speak about their experience in the previous home allocation session, and by enabling contemplation and review throughout the process.

Almost 10 months later, we had to rerun the home allocation process. This was due to changes in the building required to achieve the planning permit. Whilst this was not an ideal situation, we rolled up our sleeves, drew on our experience and good will, engaged the facilitators and mediator, and successfully achieved the new home allocation in one day.

¹⁰ Landmark Worldwide's Five Aspects of Accomplishment – relatedness, possibility, opportunities, actions and completion – are a framework that supports people to successfully accomplish goals together; see <https://www.landmarkworldwide.com/>.

V CONCLUSION

In 2008, 20 individuals came together to create housing in Melbourne that was more sustainable, affordable and connected. Some 14 years and thousands of hours of collaboration later, Urban Coup became the first privately funded, inner city co-housing development in Australia. The lessons learned from this journey offer valuable guidance for individuals and groups seeking to build co-housing communities. Our success underscores the value of frameworks and practices that enable collaboration in complex projects. As Urban Coupers continue to live in community, our story serves as an inspiration and a blueprint for others seeking to redefine housing and community living in an urban context in Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Karen 'Ziggy' Kain – without her skills, Urban Coup would not have been able to bridge individual and community needs. Ziggy tragically died in March 2022. Kimbra White and Gillian Jones (facilitators), and Tom Fisher (mediator) – Kim, Gill and Tom shared their considerable skills with the Urban Coup and supported the home allocation process. Eve Recht (editor and Urban Coup resident) – Eve's skills ensured this practice note is far more readable than the original draft, however the author takes full responsibility for all errors.

Appendix One - Urban Coup Home Allocation Process

Agreements

1. We will work on the home selection together and as one group.
2. Collectively we aim to hold a safe and generous space
 - Safe for everyone to clearly declare their needs and preference and be empowered to powerfully choose their new home and, if chosen, to freely make compromises.
 - Safe for everyone to be able to say what they need to say - the good, the bad, the brilliant and the unexpected.
 - Generous to allow everyone to accept and own the outcome.
3. We will do our best to create a contemplative and celebratory space
 - Contemplative to allow us to reflect before we speak.
 - Celebratory to allow us to celebrate the journey and the end point.
4. We will work through the home allocation by bedroom queues, specifically in this order
 - Four bedder (two homes);
 - Three bedder (five homes);
 - One bedder (six homes);
 - Two bedder (16 homes).
5. Members who cannot be present may arrange for another member of the Urban Coup to act as their proxy.
6. We will have a three-day confirmation period, which runs through to close of business Tuesday 19 February 2019, which can be extended to Sunday 24th February if needed.
 - During this time if anyone has any concerns with the process, they can contact the contact person and seek support to find a solution.
 - After this time, it will be confirmed that we have completed the home allocation process.

Steps

1. The four bedder queue (two households) go first; then the three bedder queue (five households); then the one bedder queue (six households); the two bedder queue (16 households) goes last.
2. At the start of each queue process
 - a. Each household in the queue is invited to share their hopes, desires, concerns and anything that needs to be said.
 - b. The entire group holds a space for silence and contemplation.
3. For each queue the household with the lowest Near and Tall number writes their name on a post-it-note and places it on their preferred home within their allocated queue.
 - a. There is a pause for silence and contemplation.
4. The household with the next lowest Near and Tall number places a post-it note (with their name on it) on their preferred home, there is a pause for silence and contemplation. This step repeats until either of the following occurs;

- a. Someone indicates that an essential requirement (prices, health requirement) is not available **when it has come to their turn to choose**. The process stops and we look for solutions as follows:
 - i. As a group we listen to what the person wants or needs to say, and we wait before we offer a solution;
 - ii. After reflecting, the facilitator invites people to offer suggestions and possible solutions;
 - iii. If needed the facilitator can call timeout for up to 30 minutes to see if a solution can be found with those members being impacted. A clarifying conversation that is guided by the mediator may be requested by those members impacted – details for clarification conversations and mediation is included at Appendix Two;
 1. Members not impacted are asked to wait close to the meeting room.
 - iv. If a solution is found, then the homes are allocated accordingly, and the process resumes;
 - v. If a solution isn't found after the clarifying conversation/timeouts, the facilitator may choose to;
 1. Offer further time to discuss and resolve (if time is available)
 2. Note an unresolved issue and continue the process by moving on to the next household in the queue.
 - b. Someone indicates that the home selected has impacted them (positive and negative) – this can be done either by saying something, or putting up their hand or indicating a need to speak by some other means (eg just taking a deep breath) and being invited to speak by the facilitator;
 - c. The queue is completed.
5. After each queue has been completed, it will be reviewed to ensure that each household can accept the outcome.
 - a. If everyone has a home that they can live with, we move on to the next queue, otherwise repeat the steps above until either resolved or noted for later follow-up.
 6. If, after all queues have been complete, there are any un-allocated homes, members can self-nominate to swap their selection to an un-allocated home.
 7. Any unresolved issues at close of workshop are to be referred to an agreed schedule for further reflection, discussion and resolution.
 8. We go around the room and ask everyone if they have anything that needs to be said.
 9. At the completion of the process we may choose to mark our achievement with a symbolic action - suggestions welcome.

Appendix Two - Mediation and Clarifying Conversations

Mediation

Mediation can occur

- When someone indicates an impact on them by the current queued preference.
- After the whole group has listened carefully and offered advice.
- Takes place as a fishbowl or privately (including nominated support person(s)).
- If conversation is private, report result back to group; if unresolved, then noted for future action.

Mediation Principles

- Level of confidentiality determined by participants.
- Interest-based negotiation with a neutral 3rd party.
- Non-adversarial, collaborative (different from much of prevailing political discourse).
- Clarifying and open > preparing for the next step, whatever that may be.

Conversation guidelines

- Speak for yourself and from the heart.
- Listen deeply (with body and mind, summarise, check for accuracy).

Possible mediator structured questions: 'speaking from the heart and listening deeply, please share with each other the following ...'

- Something important about yourselves.
- History with Urban Coup
 - Why you are interested?
 - How long you have been associated with UC?
- What outcome you would like this conversation to have?
- What you are prepared to do to achieve it?
- What you would do if you couldn't achieve it?
- What are your underlying interests?
- What the current situation is, as you see it?
- Suggestions for a way forward based on articulated interests.

Time out for reflection, private caucus with mediator when necessary

Clarifying Conversations (CC)

Distinguish Positions and Interests

- Positions are tangible things people want, specific solutions to a problem.
- Interests lie behind positions: why they believe something is desirable, i.e. needs, desires, concerns, fears and values.

Negotiation as a Clarifying Conversation

- Aim: to do together what we cannot do by ourselves
 - Separate positions from interests.
 - Exchange resources according to their relative values.
 - Identify best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA)
 - may still not be very good.

CC: Preparation

- ‘What am I planning to say [content]?’
- ‘From what impulse does it arise [e.g. persuasion, revenge, curiosity, collaborative outcome]?’
- ‘What thoughts, bodily sensations, and emotions arise?’

CC: Mindful Speaking

- Speak respectfully from your own heart and mind (I-statements rather than blaming statements).
- Acknowledge that your ‘truth’ may not be shared by others.
- Look for a way forward while asserting your interests.

CC: Deep Listening

- Listen without interrupting.
- Reflect back without comment or interpretation.
- Check for accuracy.

Mediator structured questions: ‘speaking from the heart and listening deeply, please share with each other the following ...’

- Something important about yourselves.
- History with Urban Coup (UC)?
 - Why interested in UC?
 - Length of association with UC?
- What outcome you would like this conversation to have?
- What support in the CC would you like, if any?
- What you are prepared to do to achieve it?
- What you would do if you couldn’t achieve it?
- What are your underlying interests?
- What the current situation is, as you see it?
- Suggestions for a way forward based on articulated interests.