

Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers, 20 Elgin Street and 141 Nicholson Street, Carlton, Melbourne City Wurundjeri Country

Executive Director Report
Reasons for making an Exclusion Determination under
s.36D(3) of the Heritage Act 2017

Date: 5 September 2024

RX1011

Decision maker determination

Under s.36C(1)(a) of the *Heritage Act 2017* (the Act) I make an Exclusion Determination for the Nicholson Street and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers at 20 Elgin Street and 141 Nicholson Street, Carlton (the place). I am satisfied that the place has no reasonable prospect of inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register.

The reasons for my determination are provided in this report.

Name: Steven Avery

Role: Executive Director, Heritage Victoria

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steven Avery', with a horizontal line underneath.

Date: 5 September 2024

An exclusion determination has been made

On 26 July 2024 Heritage Victoria received an application for an exclusion determination for the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers. After carefully considering the material that was provided, the Executive Director has decided to make an exclusion determination.

What is an exclusion determination?

The effect of an exclusion determination is to exclude a place or object from the Victorian Heritage Register for a period of five years. An exclusion determination application can only be made by certain public authorities and government asset managers, and in relation to projects costing at least \$5 million. The Executive Director may make or refuse to make an exclusion determination based on whether a place or object has 'no reasonable prospect of inclusion in the heritage register'.

If an exclusion determination is made

The Executive Director cannot accept a nomination for that place or object for five years, unless the nomination contains new information, and the Executive Director considers that information to be significant.

If an exclusion determination is refused

The Executive Director is taken to have accepted a nomination of that place or object.

What if the place has already been nominated?

If an exclusion determination application is made, any nomination made prior to 1 February 2024 is taken to be withdrawn. In deciding whether to make an exclusion determination, the Executive Director must have regard to information provided in that nomination.

Right to request a review

This information is provided under s.36B(3((b)(ii) of the *Heritage Act 2017*.

Can a review be requested?

Yes. Exclusion determinations made by the Executive Director can be subject to review by the Heritage Council of Victoria. [The process is outlined on the Heritage Council's website.](#)

What happens if a review is not requested?

If a review is not requested, the Executive Director's exclusion determination will stand.

Who can request a review?

- Any person with a real of substantial interest in the place or object.

How is a review requested?

Review requests must be made within 28 days after the written notice of the Executive Director's decision is given. Requests must be made on the relevant form through the [HCVHub portal](#) and accompanied by the prescribed fee of 25 fee units or \$408.25 (from 1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025). Some requestors may be eligible for a fee waiver if they are a not-for-profit society, association or club (other than a charity) or a person who is an eligible beneficiary within the meaning of the *State Concessions Act 2004*.

The Heritage Council must determine a review within 40 days of receiving the request.

What decisions can be made by the Heritage Council resulting from a review?

The Heritage Council may:

- 1) affirm the decision under review; or
- 2) set aside the decision under review and make another decision in substitution for it; or

- 3) set aside the decision under review and remit the matter for reconsideration by the Executive Director in accordance with any directions or recommendations.

More information

Further information about exclusion determinations can be found on the websites of [Heritage Victoria](#) and the [Heritage Council of Victoria](#).

Who can I contact about the review process?

If you have queries about the review process for an Exclusion Determination, please contact the Heritage Council on 03 8572 7949 or email heritage.council@transport.vic.gov.au

Details of the place subject to this Exclusion Determination

Name of place:	Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers		
Address:	20 Elgin Street and 141 Nicholson Street, Carlton		
Municipality:	Melbourne City		
Is the place currently included in a heritage overlay?	No	Heritage overlay number	NA
		Responsible Authority	Minister for Planning
		LGA	City of Melbourne
Owner:	Homes Victoria		
Owner/s Address:	50 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne 3000		

Details of the applicant

Person or Body applying for exclusion determination	Homes Victoria		
What is the major development which has triggered the request:	Proposed demolition and redevelopment of the site by Homes Victoria		
Name of person/organisation who prepared the application:	Lovell Chen		
Fee received:	Yes		
Date application received:	26 July 2024		
Requests for further information:	Yes	Date of Request for information	Date information provided
		14 August 2024	Yes
What is the development?	Demolition to facilitate redevelopment of the site by Homes Victoria		
What is the impact of the development on the place?	Demolition		
Explain the impact of the development on the place	Demolition		

Documents publicly advertised with this Exclusion Determination

Documents lodged by the applicant (26 July 2024)

- Application form
- Assessment against the Heritage Council's *Victorian Heritage Register Criteria and Threshold Guidelines*.
- Land title
- Extent diagram.

Further information provided at the request of the Executive Director

- Table of all Housing Commission towers built in Victoria with locations and dates of construction.

Executive Director's Report (5 September 2024)

- Reasons for Making an Exclusion Determination under s.36D(3) of the *Heritage Act 2017*.

Place information

Description of the place

The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers consist of two sixteen-storey residential towers located on an irregularly shaped parcel of land bounded by Nicholson, Elgin, Palmerston and Canning streets in Carlton. Each tower has a rectangular form. There are red brick infill panels to the external elevations and aggregate balconies.

Integrity

The integrity is good, and they can be read as Housing Commission towers.

Intactness

The intactness is good.

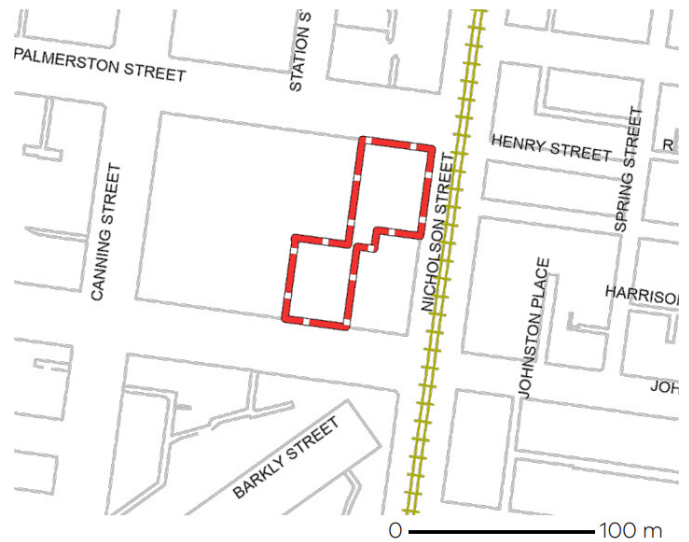
Condition

The condition of the structures is fair, and consistent with buildings of their age, use and construction, including some evidence of localised decay to the exteriors.

Extent

Title information: Lot S9 on Plan of Subdivision 702725Q.

Extent diagram: See below.



Photos of the place



August 2024, View towards the southeast from the corner of Canning and Palmerston Streets Source: Lovell Chen.



August 2024, No. 141 Nicholson Street, east elevation viewed from Nicholson Street Source: Heritage Victoria.



August 2024, 20 Elgin Street, west elevation. Source: Heritage Victoria.



August 2024, View from Elgin Street. Shows 20 Elgin Street (front LHS of photo), 141 Nicholson Street (middle of photo at rear)
Source: Heritage Victoria.



August 2024, 20 Elgin Street, lobby. Source: Homes Victoria.



January 2022, View from living room window of an Elgin Street Tower flat towards Collingwood. Source: Homes Victoria.



January 2022, View from balcony of an Elgin Street Tower flat towards the Nicholson Street Tower. Source: Homes Victoria.



January 2022, 20 Elgin Street, kitchen of a three-bedroom apartment. Source: Homes Victoria.



January 2022, 20 Elgin Street, bathroom of an apartment. Source: Homes Victoria.

Place history and comparisons

Abbreviations

The pre-cast load-bearing wall panels produced at the Holmesglen Factory for the Concrete Houses Project (CHP) of the Housing Commission Victoria (the Housing Commission) are referred to as **CHP pre-cast wall panels**. The associated building technique is referred to as the **CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method**.

Brief History

Housing in Carlton

After the founding of Melbourne in 1835, the city expanded over subsequent decades, and inner suburbs such as Carlton developed. The area around the Royal Exhibition Building attracted middle-class development including larger residences, and workers cottages were constructed in secondary streets and laneways. In north Carlton, modest cottage rows on smaller allotments were typical, reflecting a more working-class demographic. By the 1870s, Carlton was a substantially developed residential suburb.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Carlton's demographics began to change. It increased in population with arrivals from Britain and Europe who moved into cheap rented cottages. Over time, these became over-crowded, rundown and subject to poverty-related problems, especially during the depression of the 1930s. In 1937 one government report noted that 3,046 homes in an 8km radius of Melbourne were unfit for habitation and 'incapable of being made so'.¹ Social reformers including Frederick Oswald Barnett drew public attention to these squalid conditions, and these areas across inner Melbourne became the target of the 'slum clearance' movement.

The Housing Commission

Prewar work

In 1938 the Housing Commission was established in response to these concerns. Initially its favoured housing type was detached and semi-detached 'villas'. The first estate was built on 55 acres at Fishermen's Bend which included the pair of Experimental Concrete Houses (VHR H1863) built in 1939. They were prototypes in precast reinforced concrete and thought to reduce costs and construction time. These homes were the forerunner of the Housing Commission's Concrete Houses Project which culminated in the high-rise flat program. At this time, slum reclamation was also underway, with the first area reclaimed in North Melbourne in 1940.

Postwar slum reclamation: low-rise flats

After the 1939-45 war, the efforts of the Housing Commission's work gathered pace. In 1946 it acquired and re-purposed the former Holmesglen Munitions Factory to mass produce prefabricated concrete components for public housing. With this factory as the principal supplier of materials, the Commission embarked on a program of constructing various types of residences over many decades. During the postwar period, the population boom and shortage of housing materials, meant there were huge waiting lists for public housing. By the early 1950s it had begun building low-rise 'walk-up flats' to accommodate more people on less land.²

An ambitious program: high-rise flats

During the 1940s and 1950s the Housing Commission was not in favour of high-rise towers on the grounds that 'overseas it had been proved they were not economical'.³ But in 1958 it changed direction, proposing that a combination of walk-up flats and 'elevator towers' (high-rise towers) would make 'better use of costly land, available essential services and proximity to transport and employment'.⁴ During the 1960s, the Housing Commission 'established an international reputation as the foremost construction authority in Australia in the field of slum reclamation and high-rise public

¹ Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board, *Report*, 1937, quoted by Renate Howe, *New houses for old: Fifty years of public housing in Victoria*, p. 27.

² Context, p.3.

³ *The Argus*, 7 January 1954, p.7, cited in Context, p.37

⁴ Renate Howe, *New houses for old. Fifty years of public housing in Victoria 1938-1988*, 1988, p.144, quoted in Context, p. 37. Also see Housing Commission of Victoria, *Annual Report*, 1964-65 p. 6.

housing'.⁵ This period markedly altered the urban landscape and skyline of inner Melbourne and ushered in a new type of housing for thousands of Victorians. Between 1962 and 1974, the Commission built 47 high-rise towers at 21 locations across Melbourne. This program transformed the inner suburbs during the 1960s. In August 2024, 44 high-rise towers are extant. **See summary list at Appendix 2.**

Technological developments at the Holmesglen Factory

The Housing Commission's high-rise program is strongly associated its Concrete Houses Project which produced pre-cast wall panel at the Holmesglen Factory [**CHP pre-cast wall panels**]. Around 1963-64 it built two mid-rise 8 storey blocks in Altona Street, Kensington (now demolished). These were considered prototypes by the Commission for the development of its later high-rise flats.

The first high-rise towers (1962 & 1963)

The first two towers were built using conventional concrete construction techniques, presumably while the Holmesglen technology was being tested and refined. The first, Emerald Hill Court, South Melbourne, was 16 storeys and constructed between 1960 and 1962. Emerald Hill Court established the early typology of 'mixed estates' a high-rise tower(s) surrounded by four-storey walk-up flats set within a landscaped park. It was designed in the office of leading Melbourne architect, Bernard Evans and constructed with slip form reinforced concrete.⁶ In 1963 the second high-rise tower was built at Hotham Estate, North Melbourne reaching 20 storeys. It had a steel frame and was concrete clad.

The third high-rise tower (1965)

In 1965 Debney's Paddock high-rise of 20 storeys opened – the first to use the CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method. This tower established many design elements used in subsequent towers. In 1965 it was proclaimed 'Australia's highest block of prefabricated flats'. It was part of a mixed estate including walk-ups and three-storey flats on ground finished before the tower. After Debney's Paddock, 21 towers of more than 16 storeys were built. All of these except the Nicholson and Elgin Street towers were built using the CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method.

The table below lists all Housing Commission Towers built in Melbourne over 16 storeys.

Year	High-rise tower development	Suburb	Construction	No. of storeys
1961-62	Emerald Hill Court Tower	South Melbourne	Slip form reinforced concrete.	16
1963	Hotham Estate	North Melbourne	Steel frame concrete clad, poured in situ floor slabs.	20
1965	Debney's Estate (see also Debney's Meadows Estate Extension, below)	Flemington	CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method, stilted	20
1965-69	Carlton Estate Lygon/Drummond	Carlton	CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method, stilted	21, 13, 13, 21
1966-68	Palmerston Estate (Nicholson and Elgin Street Towers)	Carlton	Reinforced concrete	16, 16
1966-69	Hotham Estate (Boundary Road Extension)	North Melbourne	CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method, stilted	12/13, 12, 20
1967-69	Debneys Meadows Estate Extension	Flemington	CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method, stilted	20, 20, 20
1969	Park Street Tower	South Melbourne	CHP pre-cast wall panel	30

⁵ Renate Howe, *New houses for old*, p.123, quoted in Context p.38

⁶ Simon Reeves, Citation for Emerald Hill Court, *Postwar heritage study*, p.213; Mills p.212.

			construction method, stilted Vertical tendons in transverse panels.	
1971	Collingwood Estate (across two separate parcels)	Collingwood	CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method, stilted	20, 20, 20
1971	Atherton Gardens	Fitzroy	CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method, stilted	20, 20, 20, 20
1973	Langdon Park (North Richmond Housing Site)	Richmond	CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method, stilted	22, 20, 20, 20, 20

Reaching 30 storeys at Park Towers (1969)

High-rise towers were designed to be built quickly and replicated to achieve economies of scale, and the late 1960s was the peak of construction. In 1969 Park Towers opened. At 30 storeys, it was believed to be the tallest pre-cast load-bearing wall panelled building in the world. On its completion, it was opened to the public, and thousands of people visited inspecting the modern flats and admiring the views. Between 1971 and 1973 three substantial tower block estates were constructed using the Holmesglen concrete panel method – in Collingwood, Fitzroy and Richmond. Atherton Gardens was a tower-only estate with uniform tower types built on slum reclamation land.

Private residential high-rise towers

During the 1960s private developers and architects were also creating high-rise apartments. These include Edgewater Towers (1961) by émigré architect Mordechai Benshemesh. At 13 storeys, it was Melbourne's first private high-rise residential apartment block and the tallest in Victoria until the Domain Park Flats, by Robyn Boyd at 20 storeys (1962). The Housing Commission's high-rise tower at the Hotham Estate followed in 1963. Compared with the private sector, the Commission's engineering capacity and construction technologies in the 1960s were leading edge.

The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers

The Palmerston Estate

The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers (1966-68) were once part of a mixed estate, sometimes referred to as the Palmerston Estate. In 1961 work started on the Canning Street 'walk-ups' (now demolished) on reclaimed land at the corner of Canning and Palmerston Streets.⁷ Seven years later the Nicholson Street and Elgin Street Towers were built to the southeast of these walk-ups.⁸

The Nicholson and Elgin Street Towers

In 1965 the Housing Commission investigated the construction of a 12 storey 'point block' tower (service areas in the central core and flats on the outside) on the Palmerston Street Reclamation Area. It was based on the 'Edmonton' flats inspected by the Commission Chairman on a visit to Britain.⁹ This experimental project was developed by Edmonton Borough Council, North London working with the Building Research Station and the Reinforced Concrete Steel Company. The cost-effective design was for a 17-storey block of flats, comprising precast load-bearing floor and wall panels and stair units, and non-load-bearing panels with glazed tiles. The panels were to be cast in vertical batteries using a 'continuous' casting method instead of on horizontal tables.¹⁰ The Palmerston high-rise was to be similarly constructed of battery cast panels.

In 1966, the Housing Commission called tenders for a battery cast panel building designed by the Commission's in-house architects, with a 'design and tender' option to retain the layout but capitalise on any economical methods that might be proposed by the industry.¹¹ In the mid-1960s, the Commission was desirous for 'greater variety on estates' and looked to

⁷ Housing Commission of Victoria, *Annual Report*, 1960-61.

⁸ Housing Commission of Victoria, *Annual Report*, 1963-64, p.5.

⁹ Extract of Minute, HCV meeting no 1721 – 2 February 1965, VPRS 1808/P/000, unit 000043

¹⁰ 'Battery Casting', pamphlet by the Reinforced Concrete Co, VPRS 1808/P/000, unit 000043

¹¹ Extract of Minutes, Commission meeting no 1765, 20 December 1965, pamphlet by the Reinforced Concrete Co, VPRS 1808/P/000, unit 000043

diversify its designs, while keeping costs down.¹² Builders were invited to submit tenders conforming to set requirements regarding size, flat design and building standards. Some latitude was permitted around design and materials, if the cost was comparable with in-house delivery.

In February 1967, the tender of Clements Langford for a concrete frame option was accepted. It had engaged McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates architects, and director Peter McIntyre had developed this option, which promised to be cost effective. By then the Housing Commission had determined the tower would be 16-storeys and there would be a second tower on the site.

An atypical exterior

The construction of the Nicholson Street Tower marked a break from the CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method. Architect Peter McIntyre was not allowed to alter flat or room sizes. But he introduced attractive external elements to the reinforced concrete tower. He changed the Commission's balcony designs 'to break up the facades' and clad the building in red brick which 'completely changed the external look of the building'.¹³ McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates remained architects for the second tower but the contract for this was let separately to a different builder, Van Driel, in April 1968.

At the end of the project, two 16 storey blocks containing 98 flats of 1, 2 and 3 bedrooms had been completed. The Commission was pleased with the 'external finish' stating that 'variety in appearance was achieved'.¹⁴ In August 2024, McIntyre noted that it was 'a very straightforward construction, and a very straightforward design'. These towers were a 'one-off' project for the Commission. Subsequently it did not engage private builders or architects believing that its in-house project teams could deliver such projects at a lower cost.

Clements Langford Builders & McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates

Clements Langford was apprenticed to the builder David Mitchell in 1869. He established a small business with Robert Hutchison in Richmond in 1881. The firm operated under Langford's name from 1886 and was incorporated as Clements Langford Pty Ltd in 1923. The firm flourished from the end of World War I until the 'credit squeeze' of the early 1960s, constructing many well-known buildings and additions in Melbourne.¹⁵

McIntyre Partnership Architects (formerly McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates) has been led by current director Emeritus Professor Peter McIntyre AO since 1953. The firm was a leader in modernist design during the mid to late-twentieth century and became one of Australia's foremost architectural firms. Notable projects include the Melbourne Olympic Pool (VHR H1977), Parliament Station, Snelleman House (VHR H2282), Dinner Plain Alpine Village and the River House. Given the Housing Commission's budget and design restrictions in the late 1960s, the firm's creative input at the Nicholson and Elgin Street Towers was limited. It was principally expressed through exterior features, being red brick cladding and more pleasing balconies.

The end of the high-rise era

From 1938, the Housing Commission aimed to provide quality housing to the working poor and unemployed. During the 1960s, there was great pride in the upkeep of high-rise towers, with 'public areas, both in and outside the actual buildings on all estates cleaned daily by staff employed for that purpose'.¹⁶ But the program was not without its problems. At times there was public outrage at the demolition of homes and the dislocation of local communities which had lived there for generations. Some social problems remained, and new challenges emerged. The 1970s saw the rise of tenant groups advocating for better conditions, community facilities and building improvements for residents. The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers were the last to be constructed in Carlton. Their completion coincided with increasing local opposition to the 'slum clearance' activities of the Housing Commission.

By 1976 the declaration of reclamation areas had ceased, and the construction of new high-rise towers was phased out, the last being the Lennox Street Richmond tower-only estates.¹⁷ By then a total of 293 acres of land in Melbourne had been reclaimed as 'slums' and cleared for 47 high-rise tower blocks. Of these 33 were for families and 14 were for single and elderly people.¹⁸ Collectively the high-rise towers could house 5,439 families and 2,391 individuals, or approximately

¹² Housing Commission of Victoria, Annual Report, 1967-68, p.3.

¹³ Interview with Peter McIntyre, 20 August 2024.

¹⁴ Housing Commission of Victoria, Annual Report, 1967-68, p.3.

¹⁵ University of Melbourne Archives, Clements Langford Pty Ltd, History, <https://uma.recollectcms.com/nodes/view/59565> [accessed 22 August 2023].

¹⁶ Housing Commission of Victoria, Annual Report, 1969-70.

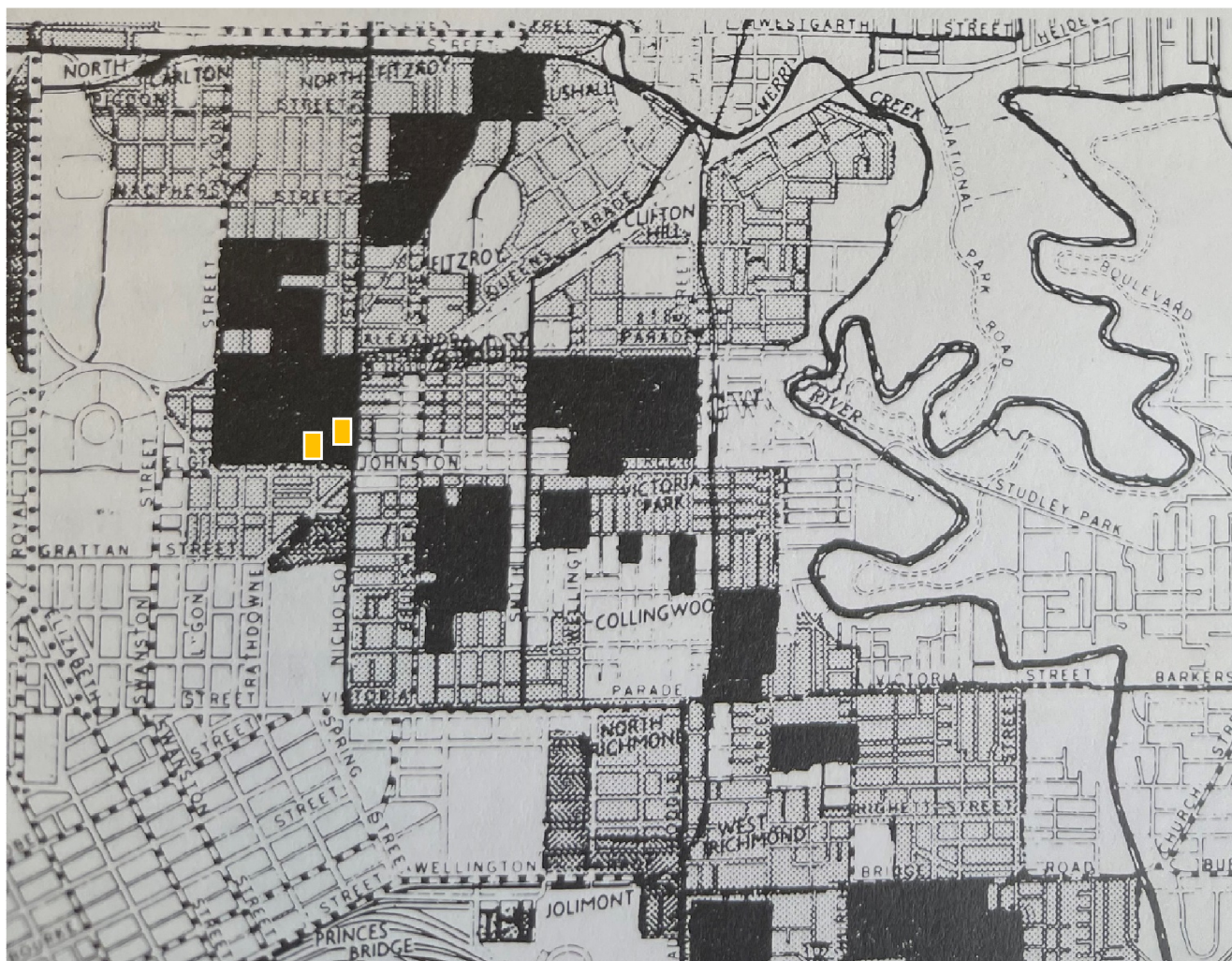
¹⁷ Housing Commission of Victoria, Annual Report, 1975-76.

¹⁸ Renate Howe, *New houses for old*, p.124.

24,000 people. From the 1980s the Housing Commission shifted towards a philosophy of 'urban renewal' and turned toward urban infill projects and later 'spot purchases' of flats within private blocks.

From around 2011, the broader Palmerston Estate was extensively redeveloped. The walk-ups to the west on Canning and Palmerston streets were demolished. New residential developments fronting Palmerston, Canning and Elgin streets were constructed, along with two new towers on the eastern side of the site in the spaces formerly occupied by carparking and the playground/open space. In early 2023, the last residents left the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers, and the buildings are now empty.

Historical images



Map of defined slum areas mid-1960s. Orange rectangles show the location of the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers (indicative only).¹⁹

¹⁹ Plan reproduced from George Tibbits, "The enemy within our gates": slum clearance and high-rise flats', Chapter 6 in Renate Howe (ed), *New houses for old*, pp. 123-162. p.157.



1964-65. View of Carlton prior to the construction of the Nicholson and Elgin Street Towers, looking east towards Fitzroy. The walk-up blocks at the Palmerston Estate are indicated with a red arrow. Nicholson Street is shown in teal. Source: Housing Commission of Victoria, Annual Report, 1964-65, p. 10. Reproduced in Exclusion Application.



Aerial photograph, December 1969, showing completed towers. The Nicholson Street Tower is denoted with a blue arrow. Source: Historical Aerial Photography Collection, Landata, SERV. Reproduced in Exclusion Application.



Satellite imagery from 2009. The Nicholson Street Tower is denoted with a blue arrow. Reproduced in Exclusion Application.

Comparative analysis

Housing Commission High-Rise Towers

The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers (1966-68) were constructed in the later phase of the Housing Commission's high-rise programme:

- South Melbourne (1962)
- North Melbourne (1963)
- Flemington (1965)
- Carlton, Drummond/Lygon streets (1965-66).

When compared with these, Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers are atypical of the class.

- They were built of reinforced concrete rather than CHP pre-cast wall panels, the latter being an important technical, stylistic and visual hallmark of this program.
- This project was unusual because an architectural practice (McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates) was involved in the design, albeit in a restricted manner. This approach was not influential or replicated.
- The use of red brick infill panels, while attractive, is anomalous within the high-rise group, and not replicated.

Peter McIntyre's Oeuvre

Emeritus Professor Peter McIntyre AO is one of Australia's leading architects best known for his expressive modernist designs in the postwar period. His work demonstrates a 'structural daring' which is evident in the bold forms of works such as the highly acclaimed River House and Melbourne Olympic Swimming Stadium (1954-56, VHR H1977).²⁰ McIntyre has won multiple Institute of Architects awards, including the Award for Enduring Architecture twice, first for River House (2014) and then for the Olympic Swimming Stadium.

Within the context of McIntyre's extensive oeuvre, the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers do not represent a peak of creative or innovative design, nor demonstrate the ground-breaking modernist designed he was known for.

Works for reference

Innovative residential design work:

- Snelleman House, Ivanhoe East (1954, VHR 2822)
- Grant House, Beaumaris (1956, VHR H2392)
- River House, Kew (1955, Boroondara HO72)
- City Gardens, North Melbourne (1970). This was a later residential project which employed split levels and expressed concrete external stairs to 'break up' the red brick facades of the apartment blocks.

Larger commissions:

- Melbourne Olympic Swimming Stadium (1956)
- Grandstands, Victoria Park (1966)
- Parliament Station (1983)
- Dinner Plain Alpine Village (1986).

Later office towers:

- 150 Lonsdale Street (1969, 29 storey recently refurbished)
- 178-188 William Street (1972-73)
- Australia Pacific House at 136-144 Exhibition Street (1975- 78).

²⁰ Philip Goad, 'McIntyre, Peter & Dione' and 'McIntyre Partnership', in Philip Goad and Julie Willis (eds), *Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2012, pp. 443-445.

Executive Director's reasons under s.36D(3)(b)(ii) of the Act for making an exclusion determination

The Executive Director's reasons for making an Exclusion Determination in relation to the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers are below.

For a place to be included in the Victorian Heritage Register, there must be evidence that meets the threshold for State-level cultural heritage significance in relation to at least one of Heritage Council's Criteria [The Victorian Heritage Register Criteria and Threshold Guidelines](#) (the Guidelines). It is the Executive Director's view that the place (the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers) does not have a reasonable prospect of meeting the State-level threshold under any of the Criteria.

Assessment against Criteria

Criterion A – Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history

Step 1 Tests for Criterion A

The place has a clear association with the history of public housing in Victoria and in particular the Housing Commission's program of high-rise tower construction from 1962-1974. This historical phase made a strong and influential contribution to Victoria.

Step 2 Tests for State-level significance under Criterion A

The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers do not allow a clear association with this historical phase to be understood better than most other places or objects in Victoria with substantially the same association.

- There are 44 extant Housing Commission high-rise towers at 21 locations across Melbourne and all have a clear association with the historical phase and allow it to be understood.
- There is nothing remarkable about Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers that elevates their historical significance above the other 42 towers.
 - The exterior red brick cladding is attractive and of interest, but it is not significant in the history of public housing tower construction in Victoria.
 - The towers no longer retain their setting, which once comprised walk-ups and landscaped areas. This diminishes their capacity to be understood better than most other places or objects in Victoria with substantially the same association.
 - The design and construction of the towers involved an architectural practice (McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates). This was not the first instance of the involvement of a private architectural firm. Bernard Evans and Associates was involved in the design and construction of the Emerald Court Estate, winning the tender in 1958. The cost of the involvement of McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates resulted in the Housing Commission never engaging private architectural firms again. This context is interesting but not historically significant to Victoria.
 - The towers are a later example (1966-68) and do not represent a special or critical phase in the history the Housing Commission's program of high-rise tower construction from 1962-1974.

The Executive Director is of the view that this place has no reasonable prospect of meeting the Step 2 tests for Criterion A.

Criterion B – Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history

Step 1 Tests for Criterion B

The place has a clear association with the history of public housing in Victoria and in particular the Housing Commission's program of high-rise tower construction from 1962-1974, and there is evidence of this at the place.

Step 2 Tests for State-level significance under Criterion B

There is no evidence that the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers are rare or uncommon or have rare or uncommon features.

- These towers are not rare because they are two of the 44 extant Housing Commission high-rise towers in Melbourne. They are not one of a small number of places and objects remaining that demonstrates the historical phase.
- They do not contain unusual features of note which were not widely replicated in Victoria:
 - The exterior red brick cladding was not a common feature in Housing Commission high-rise towers. It is of interest, but not of note.
 - **Exclusion XB5 is relevant here.**
 - All places and objects are unique: small variations in fabric and form are to be expected between places and objects in a class. This is not the same as rarity under these guidelines.
- The existence of Housing Commission high-rise towers that demonstrates the history of public housing in Victoria is not currently endangered to the point of rarity due to threats and pressures on such places.

The Executive Director is of the view that this place has no reasonable prospect of meeting the Step 2 State-level tests for Criterion B.

Criterion C – Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Victoria’s cultural history

Step 1 Tests for Criterion C

Documentary evidence indicates a likelihood that Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers (within the extent of the exclusion application area) has a small potential to contain sub-surface historical archaeological features associated with slum areas that were cleared prior to the construction of the towers. This history can be well understood through other sources, such as the archives of the Housing Commission and photography related to the slum clearance movement.

Moreover, from what we know of the place, the physical evidence is not likely to be of an integrity or condition that would yield information through detailed investigation. Between 1966 and 1968, considerable change occurred when the land beneath the towers was excavated for construction purposes. Any archaeological deposits are likely to have low-level integrity, and any significant values are unlikely to be readily identifiable.

The Executive Director is of the view that this place no has a reasonable prospect of meeting the Step 1 tests for Criterion C

Criterion D: Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places and objects

Step 1 Tests for Criterion D

The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers are in the class of place ‘Housing Commission of Victoria high-rise towers’. This class has a clear association with the history of public housing in Victoria and in particular the Housing Commission’s program of high-rise tower construction from 1962-1974. This historical phase made a strong and influential contribution to Victoria.

The place **demonstrates some of the principal characteristics of the class** in its physical fabric. The principal characteristics of the class ‘Housing Commission of Victoria high-rise towers’ are that they:

- 1) Were funded and/or built by the Housing Commission
- 2) Were constructed between 1962 and 1974
- 3) Take the form of a high-rise tower block comprising 12 storeys or higher
- 4) Demonstrate a standardised layout of residential flats replicated on each floor
- 5) Have elevator(s)
- 6) Are located in a landscaped setting

7) May be located on a mixed estate with low-rise flats

8) Typically built using the CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method.

The Executive Director notes that the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers were not built using the CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method.

Step 2 Tests for State-level significance under Criterion D

The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers are not a notable example of the class in Victoria. To meet this test the place needs to be a **fine, influential or pivotal** example under Reference Tool D.

Fine

- Does the place display a large number or range of characteristics that are typical of the class in a way that allows the class to be easily understood or appreciated?
 - Yes, but the towers are atypical of the class because they were not built with the CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method.
 - These towers are in a small minority of four (Emerald Hill Court, Hotham, Nicholson, Elgin) of the 47 Commission towers in Melbourne that used alternative concrete construction methods.
- Are the large number characteristics at this place of a higher quality or historical relevance than are typical of other places in the class?
 - No. The use of conventional construction method of in situ reinforced concrete does not indicate higher quality. It was chosen at the tendering stage for its apparent ability to save costs.
 - The red brick cladding is attractive but is not an indication of higher quality.
 - The location of balconies on exterior to break up the façade constitutes a relatively inexpensive and effective idea, but not higher quality.
 - Each of the 44 extant towers demonstrates different features related to land size, shape, location, topography and tenant type.
 - These features relate less to 'quality', than the utilitarian adaption of a standardised form for the purposes of efficiency, economy and speed of construction.
 - The conventional construction method of in situ reinforced concrete makes this place of less historical relevance within the class, because a typical feature of this class is construction using the CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method.

Influential

- Does the place contain physical characteristics of design, technology or materials that were copied in subsequent places in the class (did the place have a direct physical influence). Were places created, altered or used in response to the characteristics of these towers?
 - No. The design and materials from these towers were never replicated.
 - No. No other buildings or places were created, altered or used in response to these towers.

Pivotal

- Do the towers encapsulate a key evolutionary stage in the development of the class?
 - No. The design and materials from these towers were never replicated, nor constituted an evolutionary stage.
 - The Housing Commission did not repeat these towers nor engage private builders or architects after their completion.
 - The Commission instead returned to the pre-cast load-bearing wall construction for all subsequent high-rise towers.

The Executive Director is of the view that this place has no reasonable prospect of meeting the Step 2 State-level tests for Criterion D.

Criterion E – Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics

Step 1 Tests for Criterion E

The physical fabric of the place clearly exhibits particular aesthetic characteristics. It has visual and non-visual aspects such as sounds, smells and other factors having a strong impact on human thoughts, feelings and attitudes.

Step 2 Tests for State-level significance under Criterion E

The aesthetic characteristics are not 'beyond the ordinary' or outstanding because of 1) evidence from within the relevant discipline such as architecture, art, design or equivalent; 2) critical recognition of the aesthetic characteristics of the place within a relevant art, design, architectural or related discipline within Victoria; 3) wide public acknowledgement of exceptional aesthetic qualities of the place in Victoria expressed in publications, print or digital media, painting, sculpture, songs, poetry, literature, or other media.

- The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers are landmarks because of their height and prominence in residential area comprising mainly cottages and low-rise buildings. This does not automatically confer outstanding aesthetic qualities.
- All public housing towers in Melbourne are landmarks to some degree because of their height in comparison with their surroundings.
- Any aesthetic (as opposed to landmark) qualities have not been the subject of any acclaim, professional recognition or widespread acknowledgement.
- The red brick cladding does not constitute an aesthetic characteristic which is 'beyond the ordinary' or outstanding. The application of attractive brickwork to building exteriors has a long history.

The Executive Director is of the view that this place has no reasonable prospect of meeting the Step 2 State-level tests for Criterion E.

Criterion F – Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period

Step 1 Tests for Criterion F

The place does not contain physical evidence that clearly demonstrates creative or technical achievement for the time in which it was created.

- The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers were not technical achievements for the time in which they were created. The construction of high-rise towers with in-situ reinforced concrete and brick cladding was a conventional construction technique in the late 1960s.
- The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers were not creative achievements for the time in which they were created. There is no evidence that this particular design was creatively outstanding for the 1960s.

The Executive Director is of the view that this place has no reasonable prospect of meeting the Step 1 test for Criterion F.

Criterion G – Strong or special association with a particular present-day community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons

Step 1 Tests for Criterion G

This place demonstrates social value to the many communities and cultural groups who have lived in the towers since 1968 and have a sense of connection, sometimes over many years and generations.

Step 2 Tests for State-level significance under Criterion G

There is evidence that the social value of the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers is part of a story that contributes to Victoria's identity.

There is no evidence that the social value of these particular high-rise blocks resonates beyond metropolitan Melbourne and across the broader Victorian community.

The Executive Director is of the view that this place has no reasonable prospect of meeting the Step 2 State-level tests for Criterion G.

Criterion H – Special association with the life or works of a person, or group or persons, of importance in Victoria’s history

Association with the Housing Commission of Victoria

Step 1 Tests for Criterion H

The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers have a direct association with the Housing Commission (now Homes Victoria). This organisation has made a strong or influential contribution in their field of endeavour. There is evidence of the association between the place and the Housing Commission. This association is related directly to achievements of the Housing Commission and to an enduring and close interaction between the Housing Commission and the place.

Step 2 Tests for State-level significance for Criterion H

The work of the Housing Commission is important to Victoria’s history. But the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers do not allow the association between the Housing Commission and their importance in Victoria’s history to be readily appreciated better than most other places or objects in Victoria.

- All 44 extant public housing towers demonstrate the work of the Housing Commission. The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers do not allow the work of the Commission to be readily appreciated better than most other public housing towers.
 - There is no aspect of the fabric or feature of its history that allows its appreciation to be elevated above all housing commission towers.
 - The use of reinforced concrete as opposed to the CHP pre-cast wall panel construction method makes these towers atypical within the Commission’s high-rise tower project.
 - Variations in materials and the use of a private architectural firm are aspects of interest, but do not increase the appreciation of the association with the Commission.

Association with McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates (now McIntyre Partnership Architects)

Step 1 Tests

The Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers have a direct association with the architectural firm McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates (now McIntyre Partnership Architects). This firm made a strong or influential contribution in their field of endeavour. There is evidence of the association between the place and the Housing Commission. This association relates directly to achievements of McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates and to an enduring and close interaction between this firm and the place.

Step 2 Tests

The work of the architectural firm McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates is important to Victoria’s history. But the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers do not allow the association between McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates and the importance of this firm in Victoria’s history to be readily appreciated better than most other places or objects in Victoria.

- Peter McIntyre (b.1928) is one of Australia’s foremost modernist architects.
 - Several of his designs, and those he undertook collaboratively, have been included in the Victorian Heritage Register: Melbourne Olympic Swimming Pool (VHR H1977); Snelleman House (VHR H2282); and Grant House (VHR H2392).
 - He also designed and built one of Melbourne’s most iconic modernist residences, River House.
- The involvement of Peter McIntyre and the firm McIntyre, McIntyre and Associates in the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers does not allow the significance of these architects to be readily appreciated.
 - Peter McIntyre and his firm are known for their inventive modernist architecture.
 - Their creative contribution to the design of these public housing towers was greatly restricted by the Housing Commissions brief and its budget.
 - In their form, design, layout and materials, the towers do not demonstrate inventive modernist architecture to the degree that would be expected if they were ‘signature buildings’ of McIntyre and his firm.

The Executive Director is of the view that this place has no reasonable prospect of meeting the Step 2 State-level tests for Criterion H.

Appendix 1: Material informing the determination

The following information been relied on in making the determination:

Books, reports and theses

Context, *Homeward: The Thematic History of Public Housing in Victoria*, prepared for Department of Human Services, Division of Housing & Community Building, July 2012.

Housing Commission, Victoria, *Housing Commission, Victoria: first 25 years*, The Commission, Melbourne, 1963.

Renate Howe (ed), *New houses for old: fifty years of public housing in Victoria 1938-1988*, Ministry of Housing and Construction, Melbourne, 1988.

Lovell Chen, *Carlton Heritage Review: Thematic Environmental History*, prepared for the City of Melbourne, July 2019.

George Tibbits, "The enemy within our gates": slum clearance and high-rise flats', Chapter 6 in Renate Howe (ed), *New houses for old: fifty years of public housing in Victoria 1938-1988*, Ministry of Housing and Construction, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 123-162.

Interviews

Interview with Peter McIntyre, 20 August 2024.

The Executive Director extends his thanks to Emeritus Professor McIntyre AO for generously sharing his experiences of the design and build of the Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers.

Site inspection

A site inspection was undertaken by Heritage Victoria staff on Wednesday 28 August 2024.

Appendix 2: Public housing towers development in Victoria

Between 1962 and 1974, the Housing Commission of Victoria delivered 47 high-rise residential towers at locations across Melbourne. Of the total built, 44 are extant.

Year	High-rise tower development	Addresses	Suburb	No. of storeys () denotes demolished
1961-62	Emerald Hill Court Estate	200 Dorcas Street	South Melbourne	16
1963-64	JJ Holland Park	Altona Street	Kensington	(8), (8)
1963	Hotham Estate	76 Canning Street	North Melbourne	20
1965	Debney's Estate	12 Holland Court	Flemington	20
1965-67	Carlton Housing Site	480, 510, 530 Lygon Street, 478 Drummond Street	Carlton	20, 20, 12, 12
1966	Inkerman Heights	150 Inkerman Street	St Kilda	12
1966	Loxton Lodge	49 Union Street	Windsor	12
1967	Layfield Court	150 Victoria Avenue	Albert Park	12
1967	Nelson Heights	Pasco Street	Williamstown	12
1965-68	Horace Petty Estate	1 Surrey Road, 2 Simmons St and 259 Malvern Road	South Yarra	12, 12, 12
1966-68	Nicholson and Elgin Street Public Housing Towers	20 Elgin Street & 141 Nicholson Street	Carlton	16, 16
1966-69	Hotham Estate (Boundary Road Extension)	Alfred, Melrose and Sutton Streets	North Melbourne	12/13, 12, 20
1967-69	Debneys Meadows Estate Extension	120, 126 and 130 Racecourse Road	Flemington	20, 20, 20
1969	Park Street Tower	332 Park Street	South Melbourne	30
1968-70	Holland Estate	94 Ormond Street and 56 Derby Street	Kensington	12, 12, (12)
1971	Collingwood Housing Site (across two separate parcels)	229 and 253 Hoddle Street, and 240 Wellington Sr	Collingwood	20, 20, 20
1971	Atherton Gardens	90 and 140 Brunswick St, and 95 and 125 Napier St	Fitzroy	20, 20, 20, 20
1971	Frank Wilke Court	1 Holmes Street	Northcote	12
1971	Wilson Street	351 Barkley Street	Brunswick	12
1972	Gaskin Gardens	127 Gordon Street	Footscray	12
1972	Floyd Lodge	63 Hamner Street	Williamstown	12
1973	Crown Street Estate	29 Crown Street	Flemington	13
1973	Langdon Park (North Richmond Housing Site)	139 Highett St and 106, 108, 110 and 112 Elizabeth St	Richmond	21, 20, 20, 20, 20
1974-75	King Street Estate	17 and 25 King Street	Prahran	12, 12
Total built				47
Total extant				44