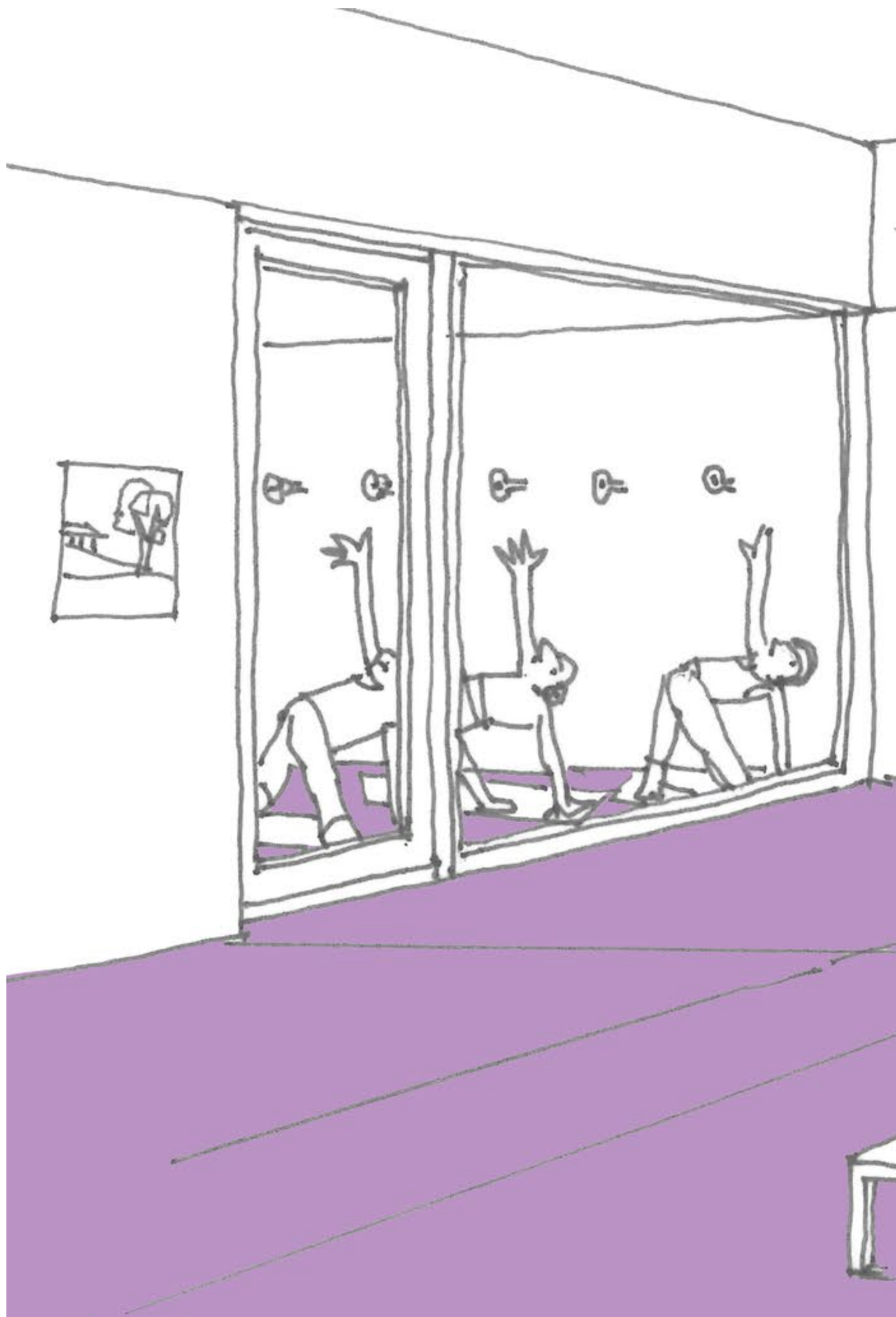


<https://citiespeoplelove.co/article/the-importance-of-lived-experience-in-designing-housing-for-older-women>



Communal indoor space illustration from 'A Design Guide for Older Women's Housing'

## **The importance of lived experience in designing housing for older women**

### **The issue: Older women's housing precarity in Australia**

Women over the age of forty-five are one of the fastest-growing groups in the homeless population in Australia [1]. Women experience ageing and homelessness differently from men: they face more poverty and personal risk and live longer. These issues are compounded by the caring role women often play – a responsibility that impacts women's consistent or full-time employment during their working lives, resulting in drastically lower superannuation than their male colleagues at retirement.

“Homelessness increases the risk of death for older women, increases chronic health conditions and causes premature ageing”

Homelessness increases the risk of death for older women, increases chronic health conditions, and causes premature ageing [2]. Women's homelessness is often labelled 'invisible' as their situations and needs may not align with the mainstream understanding of homelessness. Women are more likely to stay with friends, live in their cars, remain in risky situations of physical, emotional or economic abuse, or sexual violence, and are less likely to access support services [3]. They often experience housing stress for the first time after separation from or death of a partner [4].

These complex situations make it hard to comprehend, accurately measure, and respond to the extent of older women's housing needs. With many women facing fragile futures dependent on support from services, pension payments, and assisted housing programs, the restricted access to safe housing caused by age and gender becomes a human rights issue.

### **A solution: Addressing homelessness with housing**

As architects and researchers working on affordable housing projects for women, we understand that older women have needs often not met by generic housing developments. The voices of older women and their lived experiences are missing in conversations about housing design, affordability, and allocation. There is a lack of post-occupancy evaluation of housing for women or older women in an Australian context and an absence of a best-practice housing model that addresses architectural and landscape design implications for older women's needs.

To address this gap, we undertook research to understand the housing-related needs of older women and to identify how design impacts their sense of home. We examined the design and occupation of specialist housing for women over 45 at risk of homelessness in Melbourne, Australia, to demonstrate how gender-sensitive design can meet the needs of women-led households and lead to improved life outcomes.

Rather than a comparative analysis to find the "best" housing type for older women, our research explored the diversity of housing values held by older women and how different housing types meet their needs. This research informed a design guide for older women's housing and a best-practice report on the housing types that deliver the best outcomes for women at risk of homelessness.

## **About our research**

We evaluated four housing types for single women over 45 in the greater Melbourne area, including townhouses, tiny houses, rooming houses, and apartments. Firstly, we interviewed community housing providers involved in the allocation and management of the selected examples to understand their perspective on housing allocation for older women and issues they had experienced from an operations and management standpoint. Following this, older women participants between 45 and 75 years of age living in the housing types were interviewed to find out how their dwelling contributed to their lifestyle, wellbeing, and perception of home. Participants were given a digital camera and tasked with a photographic exercise involving a series of prompts, giving them an active role in the research project, and providing an ethnographic perspective. We developed a post-occupancy evaluation tool to evaluate the housing types according to women's verbal and visual responses.

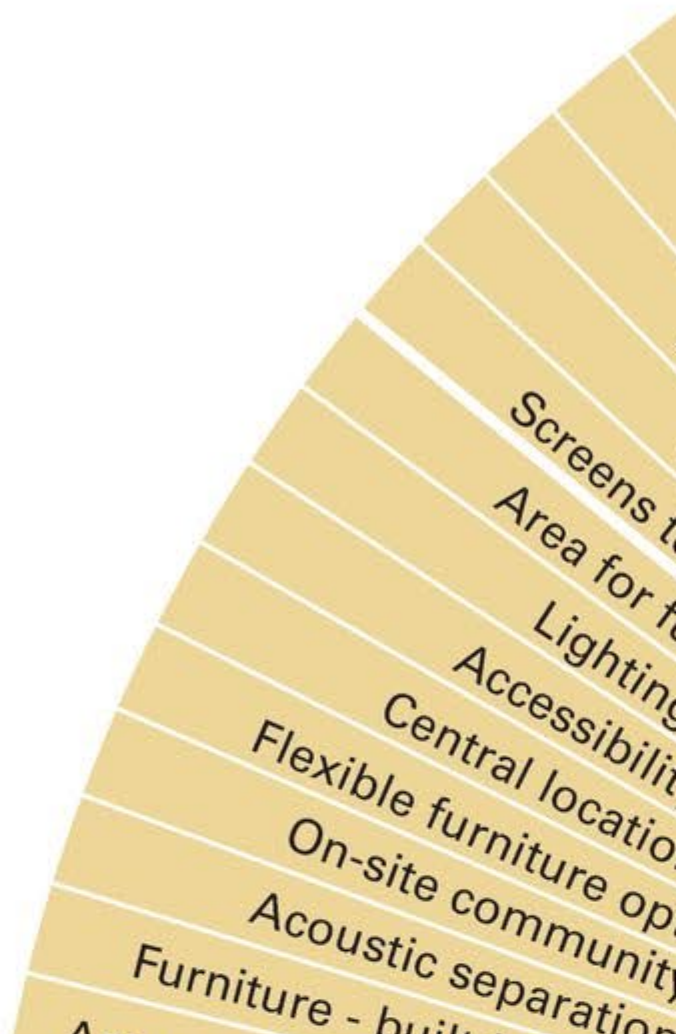


## Communal outdoor space illustration from 'A Design Guide for Older Women's Housing'

Our findings revealed recurring values in women's responses to questions about their housing. These were: comfort, connection, privacy, security, independence, noise control, and personalisation. These values reflected desired qualities, unmet needs, and positive attributes women identified in their housing, including links between physical places and atmospheric qualities. We found supporting evidence for the values in the published literature on older women's health, well-being and their housing needs. Existing studies emphasise that the best housing arrangements for older single women should be affordable, safe, secure, and accessible to public amenities. They should also offer privacy as well as a communal environment with other older women for social support and combine aged-related health care [3][5][6].

We translated our research findings into nine design principles, locating each of the values in specific places or rooms within the various evaluated dwelling types to create a practical, targeted document that outlines a best-practice approach for the design and construction of housing for older women. Each principle is illustrated and annotated with suggestions for possible arrangements of space, and practical descriptions of how to achieve the objectives outlined for each principle. An extended description of the principles follows in two sections: boundary and ambient principles. Boundary principles affect women's relationships at the boundary condition of the dwelling – the edges, openings, and thresholds, while ambient principles refer to the more abstract or atmospheric conditions that impact women's dwelling conditions.

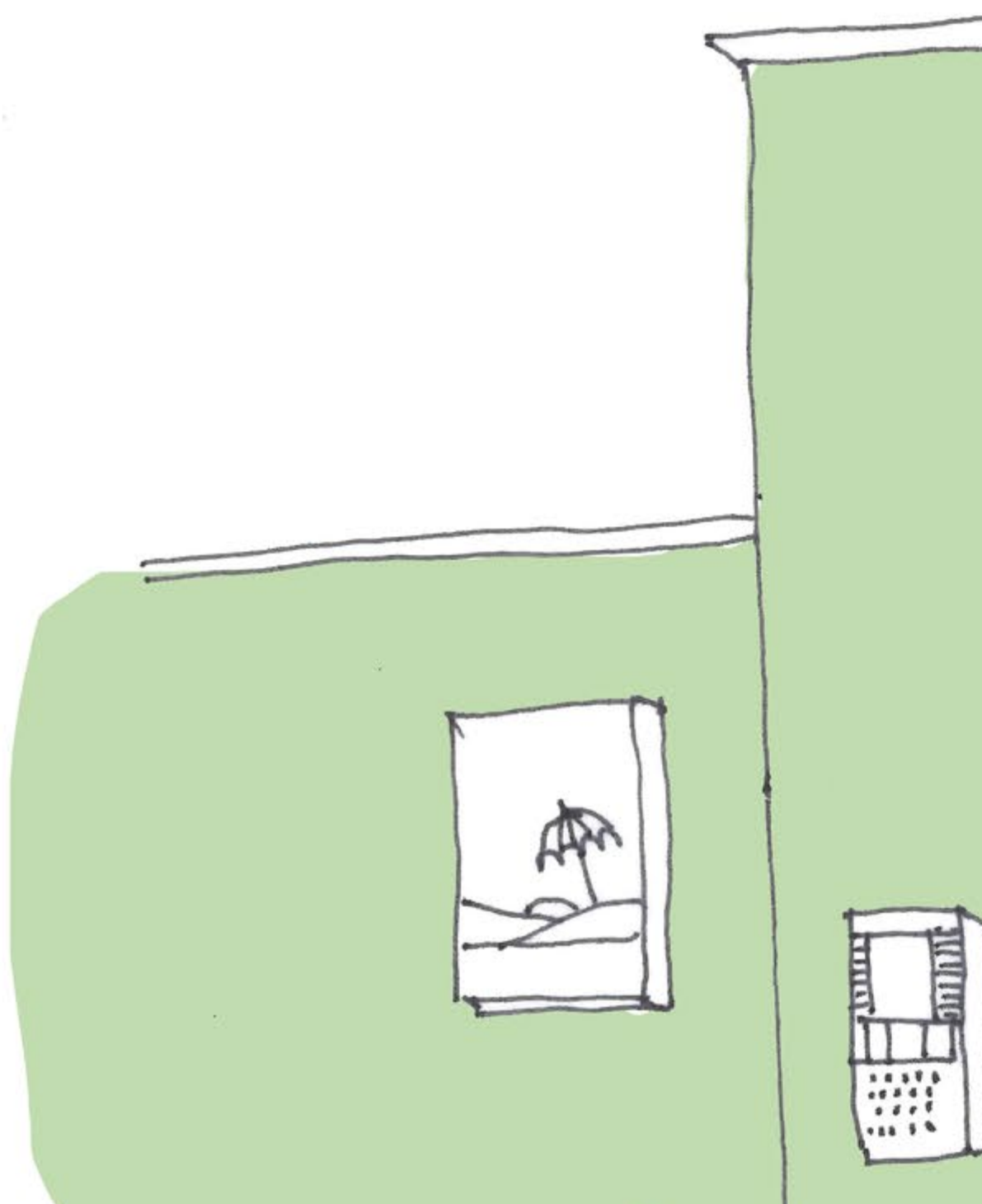
### **Design principles**



## **Boundary principles: Safety, privacy and connection**

Safety and privacy are crucial qualities in housing according to older women participants, many of whom had experienced violence. Good quality, secure and easy-to-operate gates, doors, and screens, provide access control and, most importantly, increase older women's perception of safety in their housing. Many stated that front doors were their primary source of safety and they particularly valued layered entry sequences, with lockable front gates, security grilles and solid front doors to protect access to the interior of their dwellings. For many, safety is required also for children and pets in their care. However, instead of fortress-like fencing or more obvious surveillance, women preferred to have a "good security door" to their unit that could be locked so the front door could be left open in warmer weather for cross ventilation. In addition, housing with only one access point, or no back door, was an issue for women who needed a secondary escape route, particularly for many women who had escaped violence.





## Entry way illustration from 'A Design Guide for Older Women's Housing'

Intercom systems were a highly valued addition and provided women with the ability to choose whether to allow visitors access to their property. Several women stated the intercom was a luxury, affording them a sense of control and safety they may not have experienced in previous housing. Some older women spoke of a mixed sense of vigilance and relief when they first lived on their own, and they stated the intercom provided increased safety, making it possible for them to choose whether to answer the door. They provided numerous photographs of intercoms in response to the question, "What makes you feel safe?" showing many decorated as shrines with leaves or jewellery.

Domestic and family violence was one of the main reasons women had to leave their previous homes. Older women spoke of their preference for multiple unit developments over freestanding housing types, for reasons to do with safety and anonymity. Many had to start over again, find furniture and household items, and create new friendships, often after periods of homelessness or temporary housing. Neighbours provided a sense of protection through proximity, and conjoined units provided more controlled access to private areas.

Older women valued their privacy and acknowledged the benefits of being close, but not too close. Many older women did not necessarily want to know their neighbours. Research shows that women are happy to compromise on size of their dwelling if privacy can be guaranteed [3][5][6]. Many older women in our research related stories of having no privacy in their family home and no access to their own space in previous housing. Having control over being seen or heard, making noise without disturbing others, and controlling personal space are basic types of privacy. Older women spoke about their need for self-protection, cultural privacy, the ability to retreat when required, and the simple luxury of choosing when and how to socialise.

Most older women indicated a need for increased visual privacy in their homes, through the addition of translucent curtains, blinds, or timber screens, but at the same time, many had arranged their interiors to benefit from views outside, located chairs next to windows, and had their bedrooms arranged to access natural light and ventilation, establishing their connection to the outside world. Tailored design in communal areas can provide places for purposeful solitude - retreats or alcoves - that add layers of privacy to an open space. Creating a balance between social and private zones and, most importantly, the ability to choose when to interact, is an important consideration for designing future social housing that responds to older women's need for privacy and connection.

### **Ambient principles: Independence, comfort, noise control and personalisation**

Older women's overall health and wellbeing improved when they had access to long-term housing. They attributed their positive outlook, sense of belonging, and ability to thrive to their housing stability. Older women stated their housing made it possible for them to work, study, exercise, and create. Before accessing housing, many lacked the space and the confidence to do these activities. Many of the older women we interviewed were actively studying to find employment, and many had taught themselves to use power tools, to make and restore furniture, and to install their own shelves. Many also practiced yoga or did exercise in their homes. They did not expect an additional bedroom, which would impact on their financial burden, and reduce the likelihood of access to social housing as a single woman. The need for an additional space – an alcove or nook that could be screened when

needed for a relative or child to sleepover but connected to the main living area – like a one-and-a-half-bedroom unit – was a highly desired option, particularly for women living in smaller dwelling types.

Older women's physical and mental states of wellbeing were affected by noise. For older women, noise control is an issue when living in housing communities near traffic or noisy commercial tenancies. Noise is the most significant source of disputes needing resolution between residents in all housing types, not only social housing. Housing providers stated that adding quality acoustic insulation to walls and ceilings, double glazing, and acoustic-rated interior linings between units should be prioritised in all social housing. The added cost of installing acoustic materials, preferably during the construction phase, was justified by the benefits of reducing disputes between residents caused by noise. Providers noted that adding insulation and acoustic seals also improved the thermal performance of the housing. Improved thermal performance increases the comfort level of a home both physically through moderate temperature changes and financially through decreased energy costs.



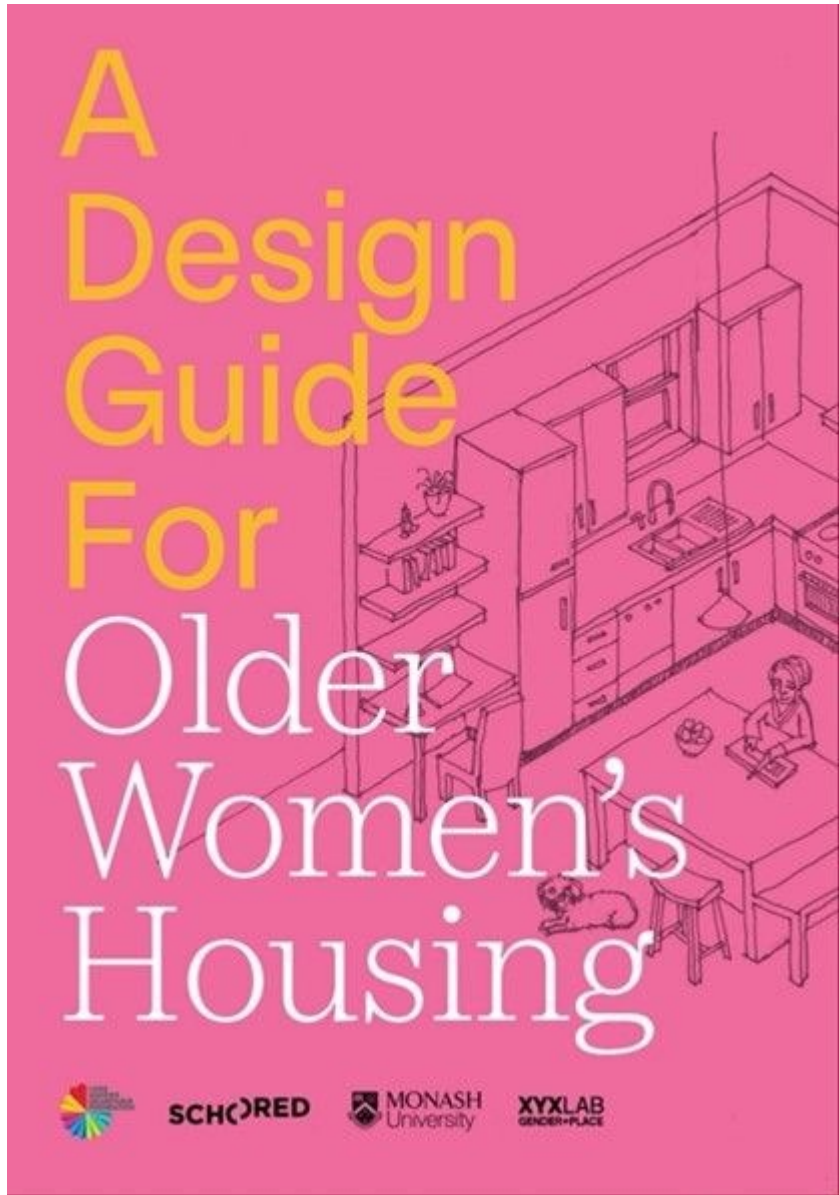
## The importance of location, illustration from 'A Design Guide for Older Women's Housing'

Although protection from traffic and city noise is desirable, proximity to public transport is vital for older women, who may not drive or have access to a vehicle. None of the women we interviewed had a car or a licence. Location of housing close to public transport options gives women choices about how they travel and increases their sense of independence and social connection. Independence was also evaluated by our participants through the proximity to community infrastructure. Buildings close to parks, shops, libraries, vets, and cafes were well received.

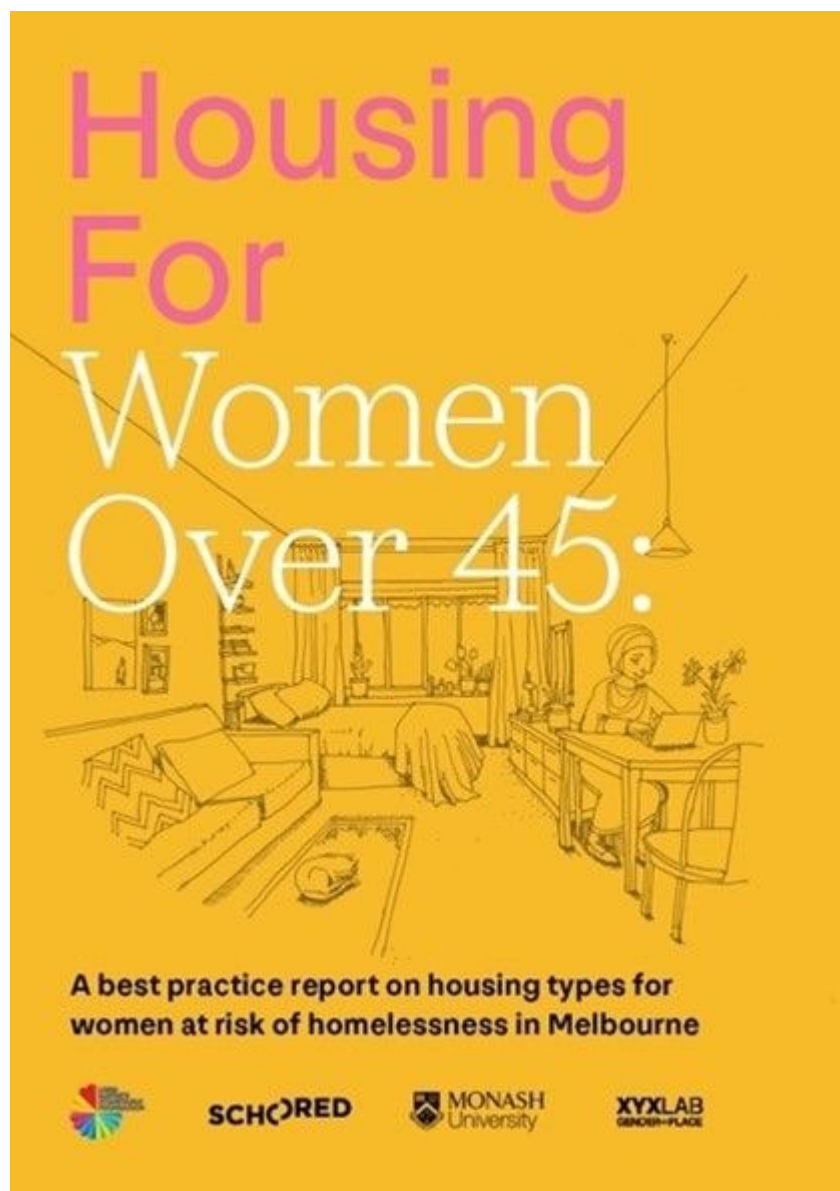
Older women are not always keen gardeners, but many become active gardeners when they have their own housing. Private courtyards make it possible for older women to spend time outside without social interaction. The mental and physical benefits of biophilic design are well-known [7][8]. Older women also cited the sense of pride and accomplishment in choosing types and locations of plants and garden furniture to suit their needs. Women provided many photos of gardens and courtyards in response to questions about how they made this place their home, revealing the importance of personalisation to a sense of belonging. Communal landscaped zones can act as a social connector in some housing developments; however, they are often a site of disagreement due to territorial behaviour or neglected responsibilities. Design for landscape in future women's social housing needs to consider the benefits of low-maintenance, sustainable landscapes in communal areas to create a sense of care without the burden of upkeep by residents.

Older women spoke of their pride in their dwelling, and their effort to personalise their living quarters with photos, placement of furniture, plants, and treasured belongings. Making a place feel like home in a generic housing type challenged many older women to gain life skills and independence that they previously lacked, but it also increased their sense of dignity and self-worth. Our photographic prompt card about what makes a place a home, returned multiple images of how women had personalised their housing. Home meant having friends and family close by in photographs and mementos. Future housing for older women can assist this process through providing infrastructure in the home that easily facilitates such items.

The design of housing for older women does not need to be complex or expensive. By considering older women's lived experience of housing, future proposals will go a long way to providing older women with the safety, privacy, independence, and sense of belonging they need. Well-designed housing will increase the likelihood of older women leading healthy and productive lives, will reduce the debt on health and welfare systems, and will nurture these important members of our society who are so often marginalised.



[A Design Guide for Older Women's Housing](#)



[Housing for Women over 45: A Best Practice Report](#)

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Samantha Donnelly

Samantha Donnelly is an educator and advocate for safe, affordable, accessible housing for women and children leaving violence. As a PhD candidate in the XYX Lab: Gender + Place, Monash University, and lecturer at University of Technology Sydney (UTS), her research is committed to the inclusion of lived experience and is focused on trauma-informed, best practice design principles for refuge accommodation in NSW. In her design practice, Samantha works with not-for-profit organisations on developments for disadvantaged communities, designs for mental health and trauma-informed services, and housing for women.

Sophie Dyring

Sophie Dyring is Director of Schored Projects, an accomplished cross disciplinary design studio. She has experience working with both public and private clients including State Government departments, Victorian municipalities and Community Housing providers. As an architect and landscape architect her practice largely designs and delivers social and affordable housing for those most in need. Sophie is a Design Review Panel member with the Office for Design and Architecture South Australia and the New South Wales State Design Review.

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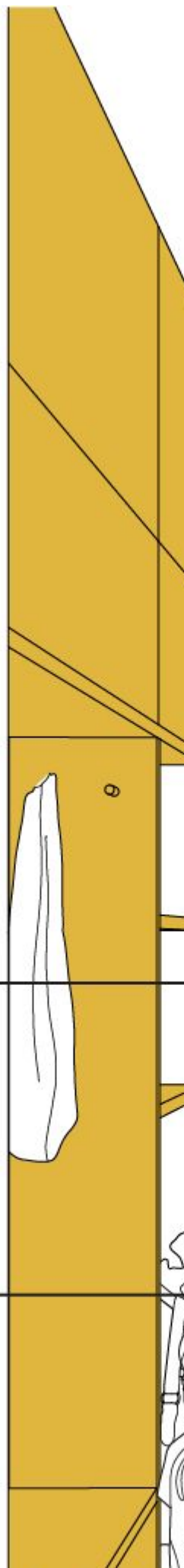
Generous entry ways to enable the removal of play clothes, shoes and wet-weather clothing upon entry

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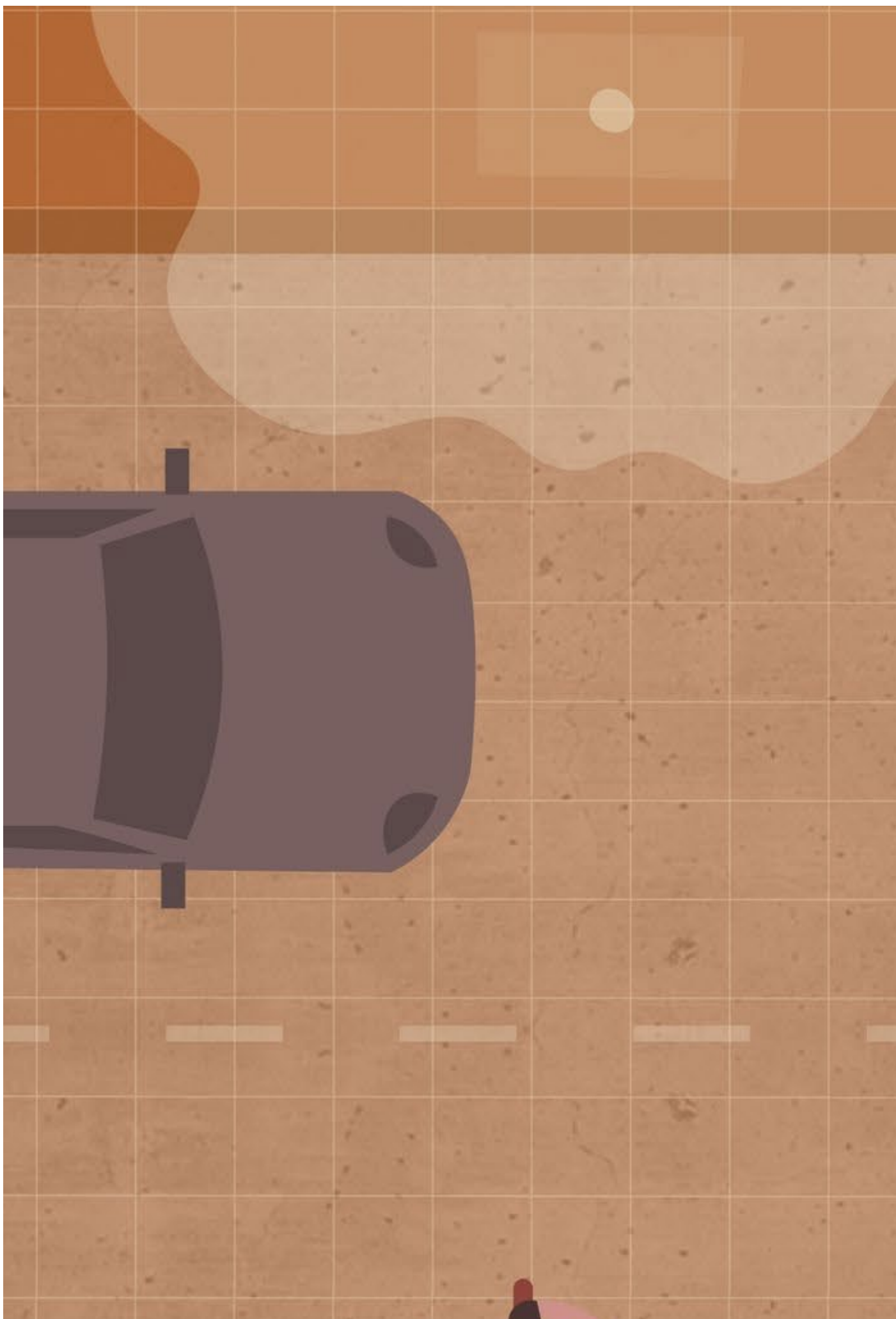
Wide hallways with room to manoeuvre/turn prams

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Child-accessible bulk storage within the unit or within convenient access



## Designing apartment homes for families with children



The city for “small men” – mode, median or just plain mean?



[Housing for inclusive cities: Housing First and the Common Ground housing model](#)

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[3]

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