



31 March 2008

Committee Secretary
Senate Select Committee on Housing Affordability in Australia
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

We became aware of your inquiry only over the weekend immediately prior to the closing date for submissions. We are providing this brief submission and advising our availability to appear before the Committee.

1. Housing affordability includes both the cost of land and the cost of houses. The bulk of the cost of the average new urban dwelling is in the cost of the land, reticulated services and government charges, not the cost of the structure.
2. The cost of houses can be seen narrowly as (a) the market price at the time of sale or (b) the cash outlay to the seller and finance provider over the life of a mortgage or, more broadly, (c) the cash outlay required to live comfortably in that house for the duration of its use. (c) includes all of (b), but also includes the cost of energy used to heat, cool and light the structure, the cost of structural maintenance, the cost of transport to and from the house and schools, employment, shops etc. From this cost can be deducted the resale value of the house at some time in the future when climate change and energy prices will have re-shaped the housing market.
3. The initial outlay for reticulated services can be reduced by planning for more autonomous (self-reliant) housing and suburbs and less dependence on centralised services (although the providers of centralised services will fight tooth and nail to preserve their dominant position in the market).

Nine further points we believe should be considered by the Committee are:

4. The need for an holistic approach to housing affordability: initial costs, later retrofitting, running costs over the life of the dwelling, eventual re-use (financial and environmental costs of recycling, disposal and the re-use/restoration of the site).

5. The need for basic initial dwellings (houses, units and apartments) carefully designed for considered retrofits when funds allow later on and taking into account the likely impacts of climate change and higher energy costs

6. The need for stringent, scientifically up-to-date codes of practice more closely related to climatic zones and climate change (heating, drying, wind-speeds, fierce storms [including hail], fire and flood damage). These codes should also take into account the rise in allergies in children which appears to be related to off-gassing from certain building materials which affects indoor air quality

7. The need for well-designed dwellings which are more self-reliant in deriving comfort from the use of naturally available energies and resources rather than total dependence on imported energies, reliant on a complex reticulated grid.

8. How affordability is not just initial cost but also running costs and how better design can influence these - and how this better design is not being provided at the moment, except in rare instances in relatively expensive houses.

9. How thoughtful, holistic design is seen as an unnecessary cost by the building industry when in fact it can often reduce both initial housing costs and long-term running costs.

10. How anybody without design qualifications or experience can submit plans for approval, yet experience and training are prerequisites to build the designed structures.

11. Note that even apparently authoritative organisations (for example, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and the Housing Industry Association who recently co-sponsored a design competition) are still using design premises with no regard to changes in the environment or the economy since the 1950s.

- Their competition was so conditional as to produce failed concepts which support the obsolescent status quo rather than generate new ideas more suited to large scale production of effective, self-reliant, low energy, affordable housing. It showed lack of understanding at the very beginning.

12. The lack of suitable training of urban planners, architects and builders, so they can produce communities and dwellings that will be liveable for one or two generations, able to be maintained and retrofitted by the average "home handyman".

Nature and Society Forum has been involved in matters associated with housing design for over 15 years, most

recently with our two publications:

- Climate Change Needs Housing Change, and
- A practical checklist for selecting a more comfortable house with low running costs and saving our environment

I am sending you copies of these two publications in hard copy, together with a printed version of this letter.

If we appear before the committee, our representatives will be:

Derek Wrigley OAM, LFDIA, FRAIA, ARIBA, DA (Manchester)
Solar architectural consultant

Emeritus Professor John Sandeman, Faculty of Science
Australian National University

Yours sincerely

K. G. Thomas

Keith Thomas
Office Manager