

Affordable, Social and Sustainable: How Nightingale is Delivering Triple-Bottom Line Housing

Words by Rachael Bernstone; Photography by Paul Bradshaw.



In a bid to support affordable housing, a small group of architects led by Breathe Architecture's Jeremy McLeod in Melbourne has developed a replicable model that is gaining momentum across the country.

At last count, the Nightingale Housing model for more affordable, community-focused and sustainable housing had notched up one completed project, another nearly finished, one about to commence construction on-site, and 15 more teams looking for suitable locations in cities from Hobart to Brisbane, to Fremantle.

The altruistic venture is the brainchild of self-confessed left-wing do-gooder Jeremy McLeod, who as a child marched with his parents in Melbourne on social justice and environmental issues. As an architect, he was sure there had to be a way of helping middle- and low-income earners onto the home ownership ladder, so he came up with a plan that he hoped would lead him towards affordable housing's 'Holy Grail'.

It started with The Commons, a housing development in Melbourne's Brunswick, that McLeod used as the prototype for the Nightingale model, without realising at the time that he was founding a new movement.

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Building on the success of Brunswick's The Commons project, Nightingale 1.0 by Breathe Architecture contains 20 apartments, 57 bike parking spaces and zero on-site carparking. It's the first in a series of affordable apartment developments taking place across Australia.

The rooftop features common laundries, a lush garden and places for residents to socialise and entertain, all of which foster the building's strong sense of community.



"The idea of The Commons was that it would be a project for triple-bottom line housing," McLeod said. "We wanted to show the market that you could do triple-bottom line—affordable, social and sustainable—and we wanted to share our knowledge. We saw The Commons as a standalone project that we hoped would encourage market change."

"Lots of people toured the completed project and it won a few awards, and was widely published, but even then, it was seen as a blip on the radar, an anomaly, not the future or the new status quo," McLeod added.

McLeod says that Nightingale was never intended as a permanent solution, even though it now has 20 licensed architects on board, who can access the dossier of information in case study format that covers project financing, ownership structures, legal frameworks, planning controls and marketing strategies. In essence, it provides a blueprint for socially conscious developers who want to subvert the traditional methods of delivery for multi-residential projects.

"The decision to 'super-charge' The Commons by creating the Nightingale model came later," McLeod said. "That decision to make a replicable model that exists so that other architects can deliver the same affordable housing outcomes, that was an afterthought."

"The weird thing about Nightingale is that when we started this, we thought 'This can't be the solution, there must be a better model out there somewhere, why can't we find it?'" he laughed. "When we built Nightingale we thought we'd run it until we found the professionals who were already plugging this gap. We never anticipated for a moment that we would start a movement."

These architects have tapped into a ravenous appetite for sustainable and affordable housing in cities around Australia, where housing affordability is at an all-time low.

Federal Governments have discussed introducing several structural measures to address housing affordability. For example, Ken Henry's review of the tax system in 2009 devoted two sections to Housing Affordability and Housing Assistance.

Encouragingly, state and local governments have made some progress in the area of affordable housing: the City of Sydney introduced targets for 2030 around the provision of social and affordable housing, and has incorporated both categories in the development of two of its own sites in Ultimo and Pyrmont. Elsewhere, affordability remains a growing problem, especially for so-called key workers—including nurses, teachers and police—who in parts of Australia can no longer afford to live near where they work.

Nightingale is not the only answer to Australia's affordable housing dilemma crises, but it's a useful part of the puzzle, thanks to its reduced up-front apartment costs, re-sale prices that are pegged to average growth levels in the suburb, that apartments are quickly resold off-market to those on a purchaser's list, and the in-built sense of community that results from common rooftop laundries and vegetable gardens.

In Victoria, where the model was born, Nightingale recently received a \$100,000 grant from the Victorian Government to replicate and extend its sustainability achievements across the state, with funds earmarked for research on existing sites and for the development of the next major project, the Nightingale Village at Brunswick, currently being designed by seven architect-led teams.

"The new grants targets two things: sustainability and community," McLeod explained. "On one side, we will work with Melbourne University to monitor internal temperatures, air quality and daylight quality, to benchmark that data against energy usage and carbon emissions from The Commons and Nightingale 1.0. That will help us determine whether those projects are achieving their objectives and how we might improve on future performance."

"The second part of the grant looks at how we might build meaningful communities," McLeod said. "We want to engage with potential residents and work out how to build deliberative housing, so the second part of the grant is a loan to fund a piece of technology that we are having built that will provide real time info from resident groups about their preferences and price points, so we can drill down into the needs of the 3,500 people currently on our waiting lists."



Tanks made from COLORBOND® steel in the colour Monument® collect and store water from the roof.

The number of people who are keen to invest in the Nightingale Model product has surprised McLeod, although he concedes there is nothing he'd rather do than solve the problem of affordable housing. "We never approached this as a gap in the market, we looked at it from the point of view that our city needs this," he said. "For us, at Breathe, if we can't build triple-bottom line houses, we'll wash dishes instead. If you talk to almost anyone aged 35 in our city, they all care deeply about sustainability and the future in our city, and about building meaningful communities."

In another big win for the model, Nightingale announce that it is working with financial institutions including SEFA, Christian Super, Brightlight and NAB, to enable institutional investors to invest in the development of future Nightingale projects.

As well as being at the forefront of a social movement, Nightingale aims to be a leader in the design and construction industry and is supported in this endeavour by its partnership with BlueScope, having met with BlueScope's Innovation team to discuss trends and provide feedback on some of the initiatives they are working on.

"BlueScope is one of the last fundamental Australian steel manufacturers so we met with their sustainability team to under how products such as roofing made from COLORBOND® Coolmax® steel in the colour Whitehaven® —which we've used on Nightingale 1.0—can provide high cooling performance," McLeod said.

Having developed a model then shared it with his peers—an unusual step in a profession that tends to keep its intellectual property under wraps—McLeod was honoured with the Australian Institute of Architect's Leadership in Sustainability Prize at the 2016 Australian Achievement in Architecture Awards, where the jury called the development of Nightingale "truly inspiring".

"Both McLeod's built work and advocacy are characterised by a generosity of spirit and overwhelming optimism—qualities that make him a true leader in the field of sustainability," the jury citation read. "That he has made public all of Breathe Architecture's relevant intellectual property—including research, feasibility studies and business strategies—stands as testament to his understanding that



The roof itself is made from COLORBOND® Coolmax® steel in the colour Whitehaven®, with COLORBOND® steel flashings in the colour Night Sky®.

real change in the field of sustainability requires the commitment and capabilities of more than one firm and indeed the wider community."

Since then, Breathe has taken out countless industry awards for Nightingale 1.0, just some of which include the David Oppenheim Award for Sustainable Architecture and the National Award for Residential Architecture (Multiple Housing) at the 2018 National Architecture Awards; the Architectural Design category at the 2018 Premiers Design Awards; and the Sustainability Award at the 2018 IDEA Awards.

This is welcome acknowledgement that the Nightingale model holds endless potential for revolutionary change, at a time when it is much-needed.

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Nightingale's Jeremy McLeod.