



Centre for Social
Justice and Inclusion

Design Guide for Refuge Accommodation for women and children



Samantha Donnelly

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UTS Shopfront at the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion

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About UTS Shopfront at the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion

The research in this report was undertaken in 2019 through a University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Shopfront Community Fellowship with support of the UTS Domestic Violence Committee.

One of the University of Technology Sydney's key programs championing social justice and social change, Shopfront places UTS students at the heart of the community sector to gain real-world experience and make a meaningful difference to local not-for-profit organisations. We aim to build strong and sustainable communities through research, education and practice, and publish research which is relevant to communities of interest or practice beyond the university. This community of engaged research, also known as 'the scholarship of engagement', is academically relevant work that simultaneously meets campus mission and goals, and community needs.

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Finally, I acknowledge the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation and the Boorooberongal People of the Dharug Nation upon whose ancestral lands UTS's campuses now stand and pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands. The work presented here seeks to maintain this care and respect of the land and promotes the hope that we will also respect and care for each other.

Purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to assist those working towards improving refuge accommodation for vulnerable women and children escaping violence in the home. It provides a foundation for developing fit-for-purpose accommodation and aims to:

- establish an understanding of the needs of refuge residents, workers and managers to assist those who seek to improve existing or provide new accommodation
- outline how this type of accommodation will positively contribute to urban/regional streetscape and communities
- provide practical design and construction ideas for future pilot studies and tailored design projects that address the issues faced by women and children leaving domestic and family violence
- assist funding bodies, supervisory boards and interdisciplinary services requiring more specific briefs for fit-for-purpose facilities
- inform councils and other consent authorities assessing new refuge facility proposals and building upgrades
- provide recommendations to improve design outcomes for refuge services in the longer term
- potentially support women leaving crisis accommodation to better understand the attributes of well-designed spaces in future permanent housing

This report includes research findings on the potential of tailored design projects to address issues faced by women and children leaving domestic and family violence. The outcomes from the UTS Urban Refuge Forum, which included representatives of refuge providers and construction experts, have also been included. Currently, no specific guide like this exists for Australian conditions.

Key points

- Despite the establishment of Australia's first women's refuge in 1974 and the increased number of services that followed, provision of adequate, safe and well-maintained housing has rarely been achieved for women and children leaving violence. This is a human rights issue that remains unsolved.
- The perception that refuges are over-crowded, unattractive halfway houses means many women and children may not access the appropriate safety, support and housing assistance they need.
- Existing housing stock repurposed to lodge multiple families is still the predominant type of accommodation in NSW. Recent changes to service models suggest designed, purpose-built accommodation is a key component towards healing women and children in crisis.
- The in-depth knowledge or refuge service providers and managers – and the lived experiences of those who have suffered violence – is not well documented or shared when it comes to designing accommodation.
- Built environment experts – construction managers, architects, project managers, real estate experts – are rarely part of discussions concerning emergency housing for women and children, but have knowledge about provision of space that should not be underestimated.
- Purpose-built accommodation goes beyond addressing pragmatic requirements of shelter. Good design may provide better physical safety and psychological wellbeing through strategic spatial design that directly considers parent-child needs. Good design integrates quality of space, light and material to enhance wellbeing.
- Constant under-funding and changes in priorities challenge the sector. In this situation, the highest priority has to be on the provision of services. However, if more funding can be accessed, design consideration for purpose-built accommodation should be considered as a way to help alleviate distress and build confidence of vulnerable women and children.

Key findings

- Existing accommodation services experience lack of thermal comfort in winter and summer and have poor environmental performance.
- Good landscape design would have the most immediate benefits for residents and staff.
- Communal spaces are well used but poorly furnished.
- Children's play spaces are difficult to maintain and do not address the needs of diverse ages and requirements.
- Flexibility does not factor in most existing building stock.
- Tailored design responses can make better quality spaces for all.
- Transition from communal refuges to core and cluster independent units is already being integrated widely in Victoria, but not in NSW.
- Children, young people and teenagers need better accommodation conditions. The number of children in many refuges is often equal to or more than the number of adults. Provision of safe spaces for children as well as the appropriate support networks has the potential to not only meet their needs for a safer life but also to break the cyclical nature of family violence.

If good design is only
for a privileged few,
then what good is it?

JOHN CARY, AUTHOR



Architecture is really about well-being. I think that people want to feel good in a space... on the one hand it's about shelter, but it's also about pleasure.

ZAHA HADID, ARCHITECT

Introduction

Accommodation for women and children who leave situations of violence is not considered to have a specific built type, unlike homeless shelters, boarding houses or aged care accommodation. As a relatively recent type of social housing, it is not well understood. Those who do have knowledge: refuge workers and managers, and those with lived experience, are not often consulted on specific needs or ideas for more viable living conditions.

The relevance of architecture and design for social impact is important in this project. The quality of space matters enormously for those working with and those experiencing trauma, particularly for the long-term goal of rehabilitation and healing. Tailored spatial design can address user needs and complex issues of safety, dignity and flexibility beyond the pragmatic needs of a temporary place to stay. Attention to aesthetics and a nuanced approach to furnishing, lighting and fitting out spaces can make a difference to time spent in the refuge.

Future accommodation that is fit-for-purpose and sustainable is difficult to design without a more complex understanding of diverse users' needs. Scant research exists in this area, particularly whether physical spaces within a refuge succeed in providing adequate shelter and where pressure points exist. The Australian perspective on women's refuge accommodation is also absent in research literature, although some good work is being done in Indigenous housing services.

This project stems from a recognised need to improve the provision of crisis accommodation in the sector. It forms part of ongoing research – undertaken as part of a doctorate study at Monash University and in collaboration with the UTS Design Innovation Research Centre – into types of accommodation for women and children leaving domestic violence and whether tailored architectural design responses can improve future built outcomes.

Specifically, this project recognises a lack of direct communication between service providers, managers, those with lived experience and the built environment sector. This guide was generated from a supposition that if refuge providers could directly communicate their accommodation needs to construction experts, then more efficient and affordable built solutions to might be possible. To enable this communication to happen, the Urban Refuge Forum was held in July 2019. Outcomes of discussions at the forum are discussed in this report.

The currency and urgency of this research and its outcomes should not be underestimated. With, or without, good design, one woman per week is killed, more than 26,500 children are assisted by specialist homelessness services due to domestic violence,¹ and the cost of emergency services to deal with this crisis during 2016-2017 alone was more than 22 billion AUD.²

Research method

Research for this report included semi-structured interviews with refuge managers, refuge workers and stakeholders. Four main questions were posed in these interviews:

- What are the needs in terms of space/furnishing/function for women and children in crisis?
- What pressure points or issues exist in terms of how internal and external areas of the refuge are used?
- What building types work well? Why?
- What would an ideal future refuge look like and what spaces would it include?

Eleven refuge accommodation services were visited in Sydney and surrounding suburbs. To preserve their anonymity, drawings were produced to show interior and exterior views and diagrammatic layouts.

Scope limitations

- Contributions from current residents were not included due to lack of ethics clearance.
- Rural and remote refuge services in NSW were not visited, although literature and articles referring to their contexts was included.
- Housing pathways that provide longer term accommodation not supported 24/7 by services, such as transitional or permanent accommodation have not been included.
- Other factors contributing to a shortage of temporary accommodation for women and children, which include homelessness, financial stresses and drug and alcohol related issues, are not the focus of this report.
- Procurement of experienced design teams and multidisciplinary expertise are fundamentally linked to the outcome of quality designed refuge accommodation; however, these were not discussed in this research beyond acknowledging their value.

Literature review

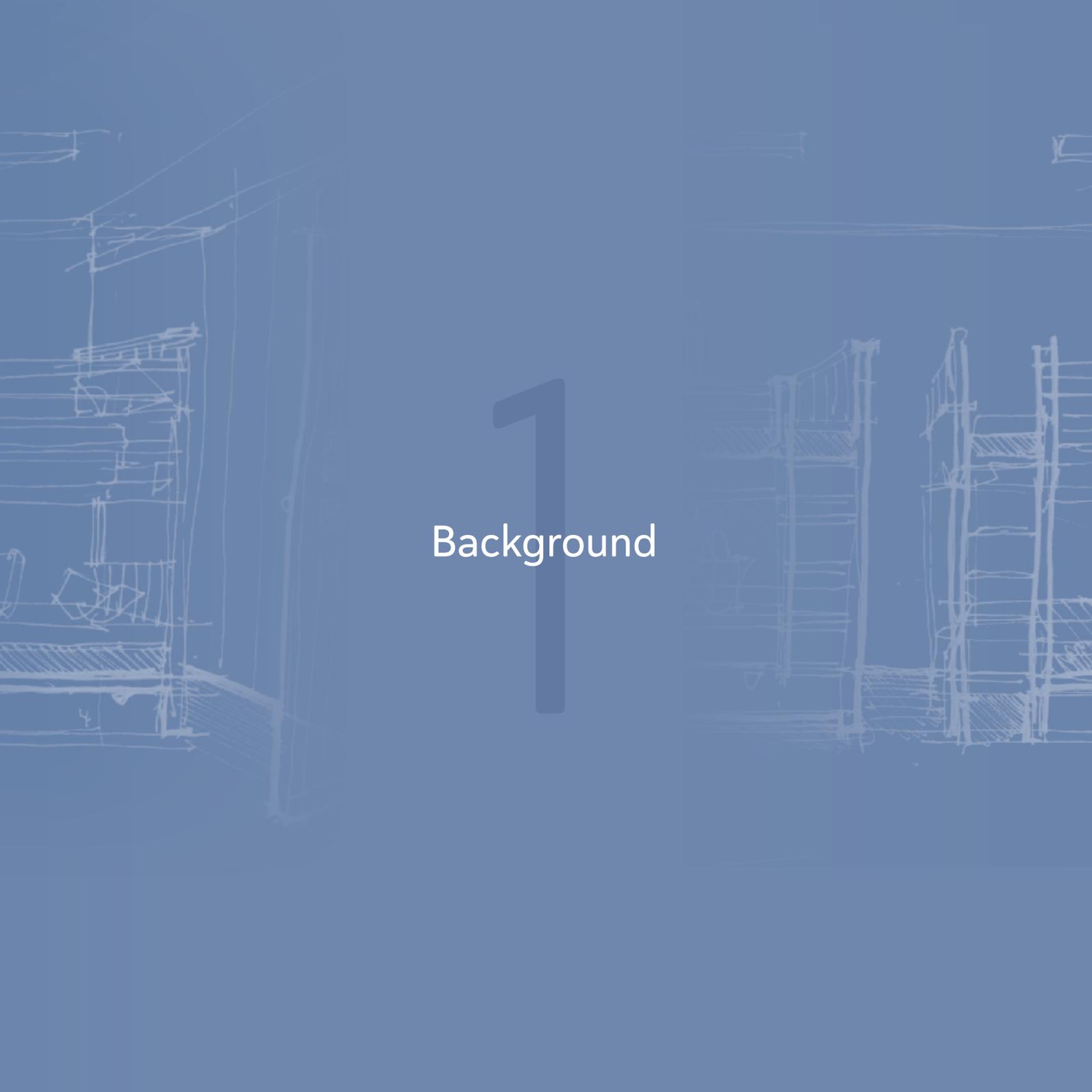
There is a gap in current knowledge about the Australian context for refuge accommodation. In particular there is no clear research that focuses on architectural design or built environment qualities of this accommodation type. Three types of literature were drawn upon for this review – reports, websites and journal articles from both Australian and international sources.

Reports: Noesjirwan's 1985 report of women's refuges in NSW provides a detailed account of refuge conditions and residents between 1975 and 1985. It does not specifically address spatial qualities of refuges surveyed, but it does provide an in-depth, objective understanding of the context in NSW. Weeks and Oberin's 2004 report on refuge services provides a good basis for understanding the changes in accommodation quantities in Australia in the last 20 years. The NSW Women Refuge Movement and the (then) UWS Urban Research Centre's 2009 report directly addresses the experience of refuge accommodation in a qualitative study. Other current reports from AHURI, ANROWS, AIHW and ABS have been extensively consulted. While these reports provide solid research from a social viewpoint, they do not address the design quality of refuges.

Websites: A key source for the design guide was Building Dignity³ – a site developed by the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV) in conjunction with Mahlum, an architectural community of practice. This provides design-related themes with descriptions of built outcomes, specifically designed to address the issues of domestic violence and recovery.

Journal articles: Refuerzo and Verderber (1990) explore person-environment relationships in women's refuges in the US and point out the lack of literature on this architectural type. More recent research from Grieder and Chanmugam (2012) explores therapeutic design to improve experiences of refuge accommodation.





1

Background



04.

Types of accommodation

What is a refuge for women and children?

Women's refuges provide temporary protection and support for women and children escaping domestic violence and intimate partner violence. Refuges are often situated in existing housing stock which is retrofitted to house multiple families within a group home context. They are rarely designed and built as fit-for-purpose accommodation.

Refuges are generally large suburban houses that conform to other dwellings in the area as much as possible. The entry is restricted by a reception area or office which is attended 24/7 by a staff member. Beyond this, the atmosphere within most refuges is as close to an ordinary home as possible.⁴ Women and children usually have their own bedroom. Other areas of the house are shared, such as kitchen, dining, living and laundry spaces. Most refuges have backyards with separate play areas for young children. School-aged children are encouraged to attend the local school. Women are free to come and go as they please. Visitors and men are not allowed in the refuge in order to preserve the safety of other residents. Teenage boys are restricted from accessing some refuges due to age limitation policies around potential gendered violence.

In 2017-18, on average, every day
156 unmet requests for housing
assistance came from women.

4 out of every 5 unmet requests
came from women with children.

Violence against women and their
children cost Australia an estimated
\$22 billion in 2015-16.

Source: Australian Institute for Health and Welfare:
Specialist Homelessness Service Report 2017-18

Even though a refuge may look like a 'normal' residential dwelling, it is an architectural type unlike any other. It is required to 'hide in plain sight', protect, rehabilitate and provide comfort to a series of inhabitants who may have differing needs, differing numbers of children and different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The refuge space exists at the intersection of home, hotel, clinic and welfare space. It is a space of transition between an unstable past and a more independent future, not a long-term destination. For women and children leaving violence, the refuge is often a last resort. Spatial components may be very similar to a shared domestic environment; however, users have heightened needs for security, safety, stability, privacy and comfort.

Women and their families may spend between one week to three months in refuge accommodation before moving to transitional or permanent housing.

There are several types of accommodation that are included under the umbrella term of 'women's refuge'. Crisis, transitional and long-term or permanent housing all relate to temporal capacity of the service. Congregate and core/cluster types are descriptions of spatial arrangement and children leaving violence.

Drawing: Refuges are often situated in existing housing stock which is retrofitted to house multiple families within a group home context. There is a common perception that refuges should hide in plain sight.

Crisis accommodation is short-term accommodation provided to women and children experiencing homelessness due to violence who need support to transition to longer term, stable accommodation. This type of housing is provided to those in crisis who also need specialist support services such as counsellors, children's welfare and legal aid. In some areas, a lack of available rooms results in families being directed nearby motel accommodation as an interim measure.

Transitional housing is set up to transition residents into permanent housing. It is not in the same as a refuge or crisis accommodation, but usually a room or apartment in a residence, with wrap-around support services appropriate for those not requiring 24/7 protection.

Long-term or permanent housing involves long-term lease arrangements and includes public or community housing for those on low incomes or private rental agreements for those on adequate incomes. Accessing long-term accommodation is considered an ideal outcome for women and children seeking alternative housing as it provides stability and independence.

Congregate model accommodation refers to housing in which residents have their own bedroom or living quarters but share common facilities like dining and living rooms, bathrooms, kitchens and other spaces.

Core and cluster accommodation comprise individual self-contained units in a single location together with office/workers' spaces and communal areas for residents, giving women and children more privacy.



Drawing: Spatial components may be similar to a normal home; however, users have heightened needs for security, safety, stability, privacy and comfort.

A brief history of the refuge

Three women in Glebe, 1974

The first Australian example of crisis accommodation specifically for women and children leaving violence grew out of frustration and the sheer bloody-mindedness of three women: Anne Summers, Jennifer Dakers and Bessie Guthrie. In 1974, these women established Elsie's Refuge for women and children in Glebe by breaking into adjoining abandoned workers' terrace houses and setting up an emergency safe haven with barely more than brooms, shovels and donated furniture.⁵ The refuge was immediately inundated with women and children prepared to live in substandard, crowded conditions in order to escape the violence of their homes.⁶

The feminist energy behind this initial victory enabled more refuges to be established with government funding in the following years. By 1979, there were approximately 100 refuges operating in Australia, 93 of these receiving government funding. The establishment of Elsie started a chain reaction which, fuelled by the previously unacknowledged plight of large numbers of women in the community, resulted in the explosive growth of refuges around the country.⁷

Despite this growth, demand for places within shelters continues to outstrip supply, and by a considerable amount in NSW. The provision of adequate, safe and well-maintained housing has rarely been achieved for this vulnerable sector of society.

Following the 2016 Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence,⁸ funds and support were allocated enabling new models like the support and safety hubs, core and cluster models and increased housing projects to be developed. The Victorian Government pledged to support 227 recommendations for improved services. As of 2019, 143 of these have been met. NSW is yet to make similar progress.



Photo: Elsie, women's night refuge in Westmoreland Street, Glebe, Sydney, 30 Oct 1974. Courtesy *National Times*, photographed by Nigel McNeil.

Australian context

How are Australian refugees different to others?

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, more than 121,000 people assisted by specialist homelessness services had experienced family and domestic violence in 2017-2018. Of these, three in four (78 per cent) were women – an increase of 32 per cent since 2013-2014.⁹

In 2017-2018, there were, on average, an additional 236 requests made every day where assistance could not be provided. Two-thirds of these requests – 66 per cent – came from women. This means that, on average, 156 requests for assistance per day made by women were unmet. Four out of every five unassisted requests from an adult with children were from women (78 per cent), where most were aged between 25 and 44 years.

In addition, a large number of these clients were children. According to Mission Australia's 2019 Out of the Shadows report, domestic and family violence is the leading cause of homelessness among children in Australia and has a range of other negative effects on their mental, emotional, educational and physical wellbeing and development. The particular impacts on children need to be addressed.

Australian built responses depend on the location, climatic conditions and urban density of areas with refugees. Unlike in the UK and US, where dwellings need to protect from extreme cold conditions, Australian dwellings are built for temperate climates, with a focus on managing hot summers and humidity. In Australia there is capacity to create outdoor living areas for dining, cooking and living all year round due to the milder climate. Due to more porous living conditions, dwellings tend to deal with regular invasions of insects, reptiles and other creatures looking for shelter.

Australia is culturally and religiously diverse – with one in four people born overseas (ABS) and 46 per cent of Australians having one parent who was born overseas. This level of diversity is reflected in the refugee populations.

Women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities experience a higher incidence of domestic and family violence. Their housing needs can vary greatly depending on the family context, number of children and location.

A current, urgent issue is how to support women on temporary visas who need protection from violent partners. A report in 2018 showed that there were approximately 387 women and 351 children accessing support services in Australia in the month of August alone. Twenty-four per cent of these were in crisis accommodation, 11% were living in temporary accommodation and 10% had remained with their partner for fear of losing access to their children.¹⁰

National and state policies also effect refugee provision. The NSW Government is currently committed to early intervention and prevention measures rather than built infrastructure. The most recent reform involved an initiative called Staying Home, Leaving Violence. This is focused on making it possible for women and children to remain in the family home by increasing safety and tailoring services to meet individual needs.¹¹ While this is an excellent option for some, the need for emergency accommodation for those who simply cannot remain in their home is not being adequately addressed. Furthermore, the initiative is only available in some parts of NSW and therefore does not constitute a state-wide improvement.

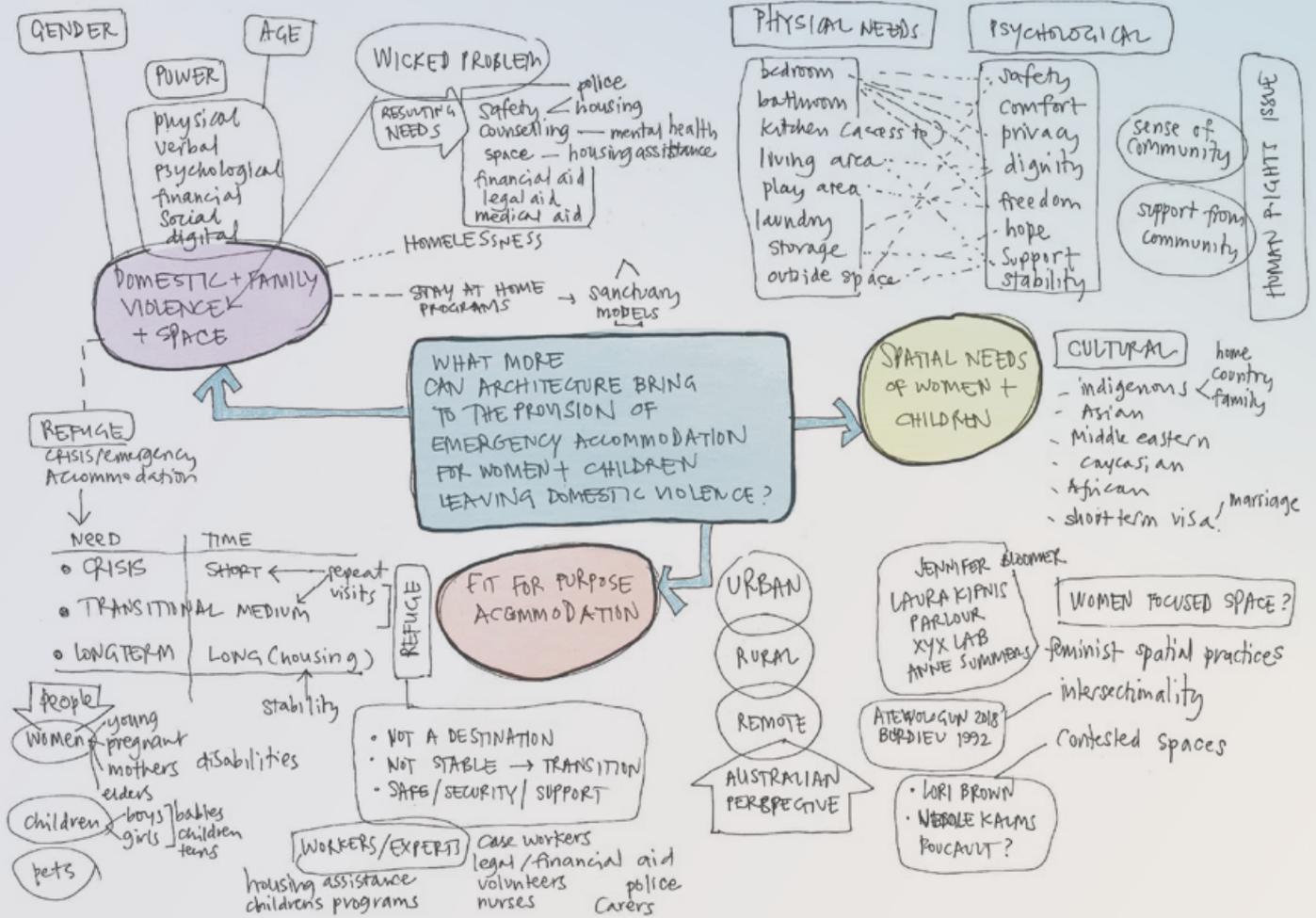
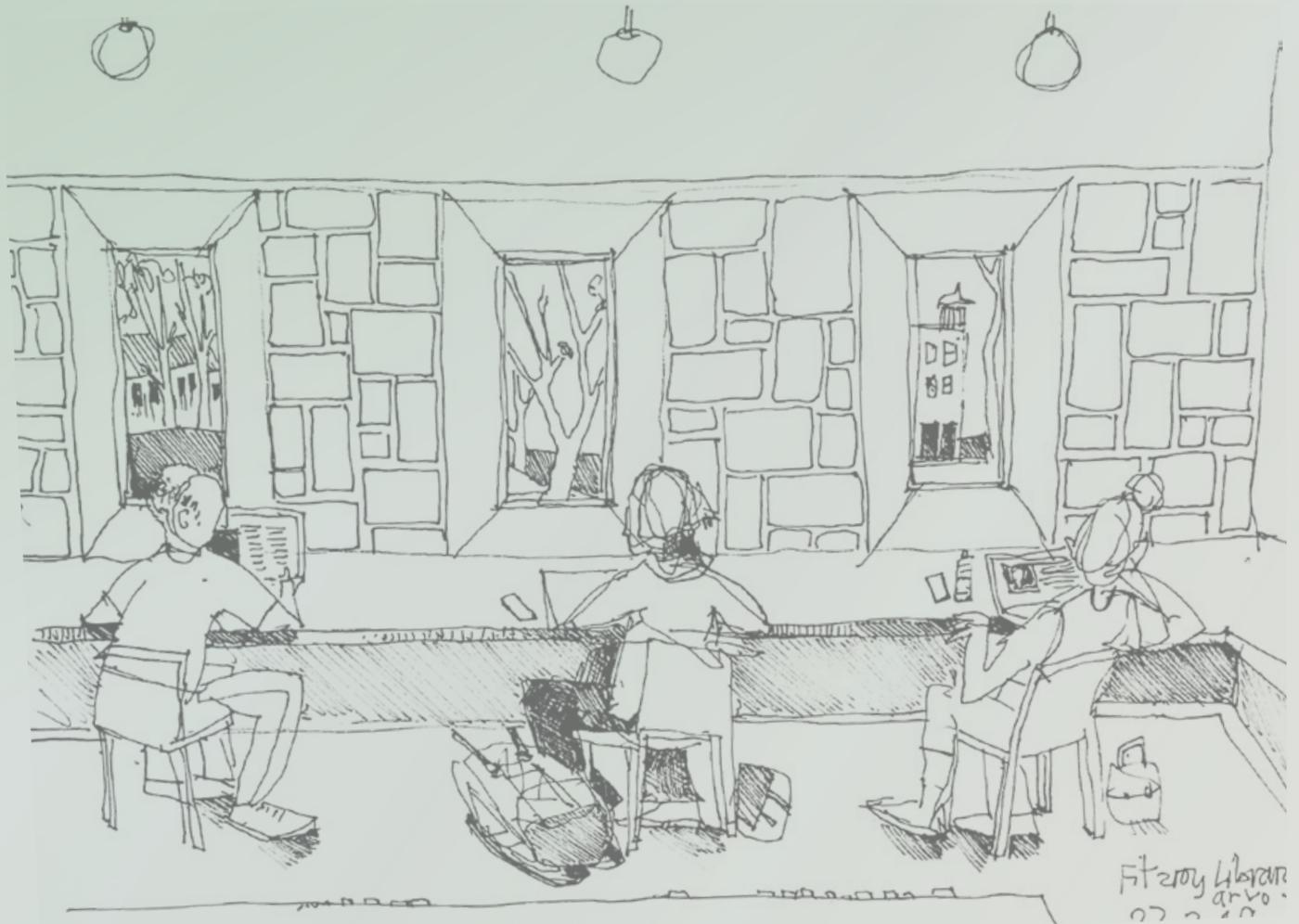


Diagram: Context/situation map of issues relating to women's refuge accommodation (author)



2

Themes and issues



Drawing: Desktop research of scholarly publications included key articles in related fields such as social work, psychology, interior and landscape design and criminology.

Data collection

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approval was sought and gained to cover the research components of the project under the title 'The Refuge Project' 17576 through Monash University as part of a larger thesis project. Data was collected using the following methods:

- **Desktop research**
Review existing scholarly research in crisis accommodation, particularly focusing on Australian examples. Review current reports and literature from key housing and welfare organisations on provision of accommodation and the prevalence of violence, reviewing key articles in related fields such as social work, psychology, interior and landscape design, and criminology.
- **Semi-structured interviews**
One to two-hour interviews with refuge managers and service providers to discuss current provision of accommodation, perceived pressure points in units for users and providers, ideal types of accommodation, and future aspirations/hopes for refuge spaces.
- **Visits to refuge facilities**
Nine refuge services in the Sydney urban region were visited, with an additional two in Melbourne. These sites were documented through hand-drawn sketches to clarify and record spatial layouts, types of materials and furnishings, and activities taking place. These drawings help to de-identify the refuge site while providing a valuable illustrative function for explaining the status quo.
- **Urban Refuge Forum**
This event brought experts from the refuge and construction sectors together to discuss existing and future accommodation requirements. Comments, suggestions and issues were captured with the help of table hosts who initiated and recorded the output.

Research findings

What are the recurring themes and issues in domestic violence accommodation? A series of visits to 11 refuges in Sydney and surrounding suburbs was conducted between 2018 and 2019. These visits involved semi-structured interviews with refuge managers and service providers and a tour of the refuge to observe conditions firsthand. Nine of the 11 services were specific to domestic and family violence. Two were for homeless people of all genders, and included women and children leaving violence.

Discussions focused on existing spatial conditions of accommodation and contextual issues from the point of view of the service provider, and revealed several recurring themes and ongoing issues that form the framework of this guide. As well as discussing existing housing issues, the question of what an 'ideal' refuge might look like was asked.

Three key issues were common to all:

- Access to accommodation
- Promoting dignity and wellbeing for women and children
- The stability of the service

All of these issues relate in some way to the quality of the physical space:

- All of the services were fully tenanted, or would be within 12 hours, showing a constant and complex need for accommodation.
- All spaces within the refuges showed an effort to create warm, inclusive, homely, calm environments for residents. In most cases this was evident in the fit-out of spaces and efforts to furnish each room with an understanding of trauma and its impacts.
- The stability of a service was a more complex issue relating to the ability to raise adequate funds to maintain the property and longevity of the lease, which restricted upgrades or renewal of built fabric and running costs, in particular heating and cooling, which at times could not be met.



Drawing: Refuge managers and service providers discussed current types of accommodation, pressure points in units for users and providers and aspirations for the service.

Pressure points

- Kitchens caused spatial conflict in eight out of 11 refuges. Major problems included cleaning up and food being stolen by other residents. Adequate storage for fridge and dry goods was a problem in several of the refuges. Three services had self-contained units with small kitchenettes, which worked well.
- Shared bathrooms caused conflict in four refuges. Problems included access to washing and cleanliness of the spaces. The number of bathrooms and fit-outs did not seem to be an issue. One refuge had installed an extra shower and toilet in the laundry for children to centralise their toys and bath equipment.
- Laundries caused conflict for five refuge services. Access to washing machines and drying areas were an issue. Timing of cycles tended to cause conflict, with some residents dumping other residents' wet washing on the floor in order to access machines. Almost all machines were coin-operated, requiring tokens provided by staff.
- Foyer areas posed issues in five services. Issues included lack of adequate lighting, prams and children's bikes being left near the front door, complexity of gates and screen doors for those with mobility issues or carrying children and belongings, and the need for constant tidying of the space by staff.
- Children's internal play spaces posed some obvious issues with storage of toys and maintenance of the space in two services. Refuges with child-focused spaces (furniture, toys and activities only for children) worked better than living rooms with an area full of toys.
- Refuge manager's quarters in four services were discussed as an issue, mainly in terms of residents accessing staff at all hours, even when not urgent. A lack of privacy for the staff member to rest during long shifts was an obvious issue.
- Thermal comfort was stated as an issue for eight refuges, with residents feeling hot in summer and cold in winter in all living areas.



Drawing: Some existing services are transitioning from congregate kitchens to independent units with kitchenettes and bathrooms shared between one or two rooms to increase a sense of privacy and control over personal space.

Quality points

- Security was evident with CCTV cameras and secure doors and screens in all refuges, but there were rarely high walls or prison-like fences. Reception areas were easy to locate and created a necessary, but not overbearing threshold between inside and outside.
- Dining areas in communal services were well used, not only for meals, but for meetings, workshops and informal discussions. Even in the refuges with self-contained units, the communal dining space acted as a hub for the residents.
- Homework areas for school-age children were appreciated and well used.
- Garden spaces were well used, even when not maintained. Refuge managers in five services expressed a desire to improve landscaping to provide better quality external areas for residents and staff.
- Community engagement was obvious in program spaces/workshop areas.
- Services employed a cleaner in almost all refuges to alleviate conflict to do with housework.
- Granny flat structures were a positive addition and provided flexibility to services.

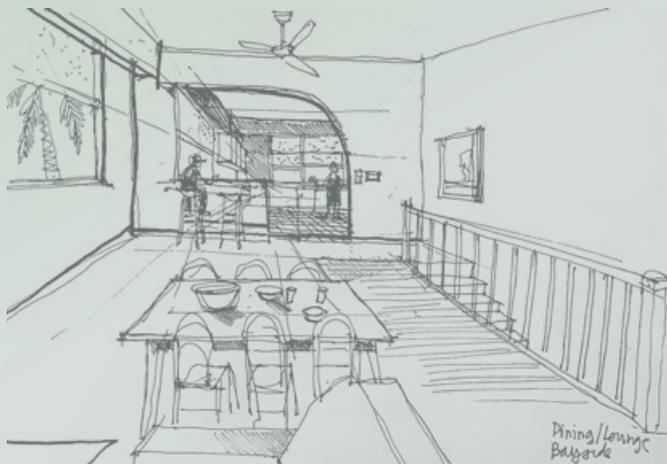
Action is the antidote
to despair.

JOAN BAEZ, SINGER

Design-related themes

Main themes derived from the interviews and observations of refuge accommodation

Nine main themes were derived from the interviews, observations and research. These themes focus on qualitative aspects of the refuge as a network of spaces, and operate at various scales. These themes are ordered by perceived understanding of importance, based on conversations with service providers. They are: Safety, privacy, dignity, flexibility, accessibility, child-focused, sustainable, therapeutic and sense of home. They form the framework for the design principles discussed in Chapter 3.



Drawing (above): Refuge kitchen and dining space in a newly opened facility - clever zoning through the use of floor covering, colour and lighting help to clearly demarcate different areas.

Photo: UTS Shopfront Refuge Forum, 26 July 2019 - the team of experts

Drawing (opposite): Homework areas for different age groups: desks and quiet areas that are not isolated for supported homework sessions and a sense of connection to home.

Urban Refuge Forum responses

A summary of discussion points captured during the Urban Refuge Forum

The Urban Refuge Forum held at UTS in July 2019 directly addressed the urgent, unmet need for building stock for women and families escaping domestic violence by connecting a network of clients, service providers, refuge workers and construction experts to discuss and review the first draft of design principles.

The session provided a unique opportunity for those working in, managing and engaging in refuge service provision to collaborate with experts from the construction management, real estate and building industries. This event also created a potential community of practice. The forum provided an important and innovative step in the research trajectory for this report, and contributed towards modelling future fit-for-purpose refuge accommodation in Sydney and NSW. The future of this project will benefit greatly from the knowledge, expertise and collaborative energy provided in this session.

The forum produced three levels of investigation: current state challenges, building future state refuge accommodation, and reworking existing spaces. Questions included:

Purpose built spaces – the future refuge

- What does a fit-for-purpose space look like?
- What needs to happen for this type of space to exist?
- Are there other building types that would work?
- What can be learned from modular space design?

Reworking the existing refuge

- How can existing accommodation be altered to suit?
- What alterations to existing spaces can make a difference now?
- What good examples of refuge accommodation already exist?

What is missing?

What has not been addressed here?

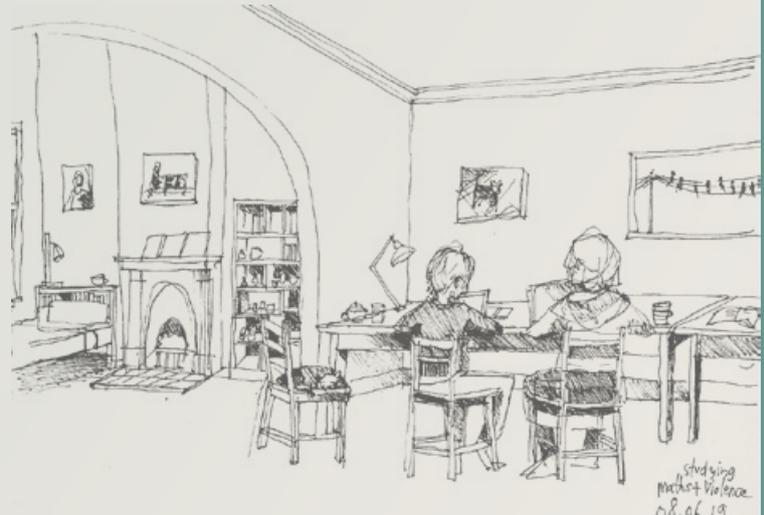
Themes addressed

Participants selected to work on one of five tables to address a particular group of themes, extracted from the draft version of the design guide. These themes were:

- safe and private
- communal and flexible
- trauma-informed and dignified
- accessible and diverse
- child and family focused.

Summary of table discussions

Participants worked through three selected design principles, addressing the existing and future state of refuge accommodation in Australia. Their discussions were recorded by a table host, and participants were encouraged to draw and create diagrams or to use the provided building blocks to explain their ideas. Visual explanatory tools were supported to stimulate discussions between refuge providers and construction-focused experts who might not necessarily be 'speaking the same language'. Summaries of conversations at each group table follow.



Safe + private

Future: The idea of anonymity has changed due to technology. Being hidden in the suburbs is perhaps not necessary now. Safety needs to be invisible but effective. Would refuges be more accessible/safer if they advertised themselves to the community? Digital safety is difficult for refuges to monitor and is the cause of some families being relocated to other services when safety is breached by a resident contacting a perpetrator about their location. Self-contained units solve all sorts of issues to do with safety and privacy.

Existing: Safety is compromised by visitors and volunteers who may not have clearance to be in the refuge, or who overstep their welcome by working outside their scope of duties. Landscaped gardens assist in maintaining privacy.



Communal + flexible

Future: Providing a communal kitchen and smaller private kitchenettes in units helps maintain calm and promotes flexibility, particularly with children. Communal kitchens foster interactions that can lead to strong friendships. Better acoustic design between units and communal spaces is needed. Child-focused areas for digitally capable children should be considered as their connection to an online community is important to their sense of belonging. This has implications for digital safety and surveillance. Consider modular living spaces/additional units as ‘meanwhile space’. Consider mezzanines and moveable partitions as ways of separating areas without enclosing completely.

Existing: Short-term visa holders are currently the most impacted by refuge life. The average length of stay in a refuge is seven weeks, but for visa-compromised residents, the average stay is eight months. Wi-Fi integration poses challenges within a multi-unit refuge. The smoking area is a well-used communal space (but needs cigarette butt solutions). Landscape provides excellent potentials for communal gathering spaces and flexibility around seating, comfort and usage patterns throughout the year. Consider integrating program areas in a covered gazebo space.

Trauma-informed + dignified

Future: Women, children and teens within a family unit need independent zones. Shared spaces can cause conflict or re-traumatisation. Teens tend to retreat to their bedrooms for solitude, but they need to have the option to use teenage-focused spaces. Access to internal courtyards provides serenity, calm and balance. Residents need their own coffee/tea-making space and to be able to retreat to their own veranda or porch for quiet. Sensory play areas for children should be integrated. Ability to provide for longer stays (more than 12 weeks) benefits all residents. Wherever possible, provide self-contained units for better outcomes.

Existing: Security of possessions – residents and staff need to feel their belongings are secure. Indignity is caused by having to get dressed in shared bathrooms and to transport toiletries. Boundaries between professional staff and residents needs to be established to maintain a sense of identity for both. Rooms set up as quiet zones, with cool colours, or as leisure space or quiet space. Providing a space that feels like home normalises and promotes healing.

Accessible + diverse

Future: Granny flats provide accessibility for mothers with teenage boys (where age limitation policies exist), and women or children with access issues generally. Refuges are becoming more pet friendly and are working with more access options for various animals. Sustainable ‘resort’-style design with a central community/admin space is ideal and provides diversity for single women or larger family groups. Focus on outdoors to provide more diversity of spaces and access to nature for wellbeing. Increase diversity of living spaces – using modular design, granny flat models and hub-and-spoke ideas for future designs.

Existing: Increase and improve access to green space and landscaped areas like verandas and decks. Use of visuals for supporting understanding in diverse communities. Accessibility ramps should ideally be positioned at the rear of the property.

Child + family focused

Future: Distinct spaces tailored to the needs of infants, children and teenagers should be considered. Each age group needs different furnishings, layouts and levels of safety. Consider location of windows for children and adults (high and low). Create spaces that support child-parent relationships and attachment. Consider vegetable gardens, compost and chickens for outdoor spaces to engage children in caring activities. Pets may be constraining for some refuges – consider fostering pets nearby for good access. Include spaces able to support different responses to trauma – visual, tactile, sensory areas as rooms and in gardens. Provide areas for children to retreat – a nest space, reading nook, window seat for quiet contemplation and independent play.

Existing: Homework space needs to be integrated into living area. Space for two laptops per house. Storage for toys is complex but ensures calm and safety. Interconnected rooms work well for children to be independent but still connected. Integrate routine and normalising ‘home’ activities for residents and children.



What else do we need to consider?

The following inclusions from participants were listed:

- There are many lessons that can be learned from leisure/ tourist accommodation and resorts in making beautiful, site-responsive environments, deliberate communities and cultures within the refuge.
- Container/modular accommodation to add units when required.
- Why should designers and service providers have the only input – what about the residents?
- ‘Meanwhile space’ – how can we make better use of vacant land, empty building stock, temporary leases?
- Why is controlled space necessary – could safe rooms be integrated in existing houses?
- Flatmate.com approach to transitory or permanent accommodation should be considered.
- What happens if the refuge is ‘too good’ and makes it difficult to accept lower level accommodation on exit?
- Sustainable buildings should be a requirement rather than a luxury.
- Spaces to meet family and friends need to be considered in a safe/independent zone.

Photo (opposite): Participants self-allocated to themed areas - themes available included safe and private, communal and flexible, trauma-informed and dignified, accessible and diverse, child and family focused.

Photo (left): Blocks were provided at each of the tables to help participants explain ideas by building them.

Scales of action: Strategic planning, design principles, details

Strategic planning

Establishing a well-considered and innovative design brief means getting the right mix of people in the room to talk through strategies for completing the project. As part of the early stages of planning, it's also necessary to undertake:

- adequate consultation with interdisciplinary teams to develop a tailored brief
- building materials and systems research for innovative sustainable outcomes
- evaluation after occupation for the constant improvement of outcomes.

Design teams should be briefed by interdisciplinary teams, including providers, managers, staff, stakeholders, domestic violence experts and construction experts. This will help create a rigorous and considered design brief tailored to the specific needs of the refuge. The inclusion of local community leaders, law enforcement, medical professionals and experts in childhood development enables improved support and a multidisciplinary approach to designing future accommodation.

Accommodation for refuge services requires multiples of living spaces such as bedrooms, independent living units, kitchens and consultation spaces. Potential exists for modular, systematised components to provide a consistent quality and economic advantage to providing safe, affordable and sustainable spaces.

Independent experts can provide constructive, critical advice about designs, both during design development and after construction is completed. By evaluating the design postoccupation and also regularly during the design cycle, more effective decision-making about the efficacy of design decisions is possible. More community and stakeholder input into evaluation processes also has the potential to strengthen the financial stability of a project.

Design principles

The design principles operate at the scale of the built envelope and inform what necessary relationships need to be integrated. It is at this stage that the desired physical and atmospheric qualities of the refuge space are translated into proposed built form. Important relationships to consider are those between:

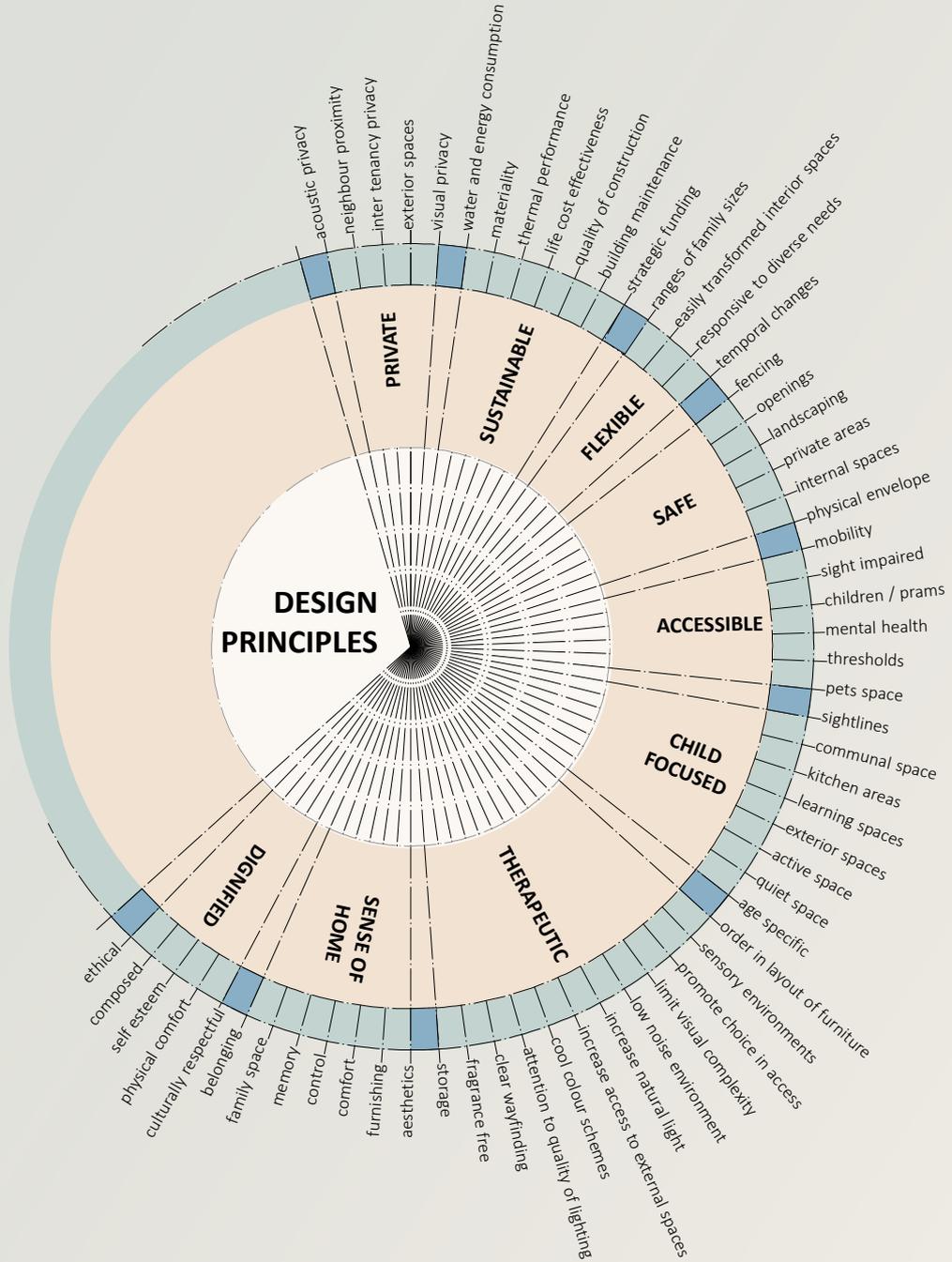
- spaces and people within the refuge
- spaces and functions
- the built envelope and experiential aspects.

Detail

Detail design operates at the scale of the individual user. Good quality detailing impacts the physical and experiential outcome of the project. Detailing is also needed for good environmental and functional performance.

- Focus on relationships between an individual and specific parts of a room.
- Consider attributes – light, comfort, materiality.
- Think carefully about therapeutic details.

Design principle diagram: The nine themes with spatial examples adjacent each segment. These examples may relate to many principles simultaneously.



3 Design principles

+ quilts
rings - calm
- consistency

PRINCIPLE 1

Safety

Intent

To increase both the real and perceived sense of safety without creating a prison-like atmosphere.

Suggestions

- Provide good views of entrances and corridors to staff and residents to increase the perception of safety.
- Install CCTV at the entrance and other access points to the property.
- Create a layered entry sequence with security gates, entry gate and front door screen to enable controlled access of visitors/strangers.
- Provide secure screens to doors and windows for actual and perceived safety.
- Provide safe spaces for children to play/socialise within the refuge and outside.
- Provide well-designed and secure connections between internal and external spaces that are screened from the street. Encourage access to outdoor spaces for increased physical and mental wellbeing.
- Lighting for exterior areas at night is important to enable access to high-use areas like clotheslines and smoking areas.
- Provide well-organised, logical layout of rooms to help manage levels of stress, confusion or disorientation for users.
- Visual connections to exterior landscapes promotes wellness – design of openings can create these without compromising the perception of safety

Drawing (top right): Create a layered entry sequence with security gates, entry gate and front door screen to enable controlled access of visitors/strangers. Provide secure screens to doors and windows for actual and perceived safety.

Drawing (bottom right): Logical, well-organised layout of rooms and circulation is important in managing levels of stress, confusion or disorientation for refuge users experiencing trauma. Ability to navigate through spaces with clear views of entrances and corridors has direct links to the perception of safety.

Background

Refuge buildings need to provide physical security from external dangers, but they should also provide the more complex 'sense of safety' for women and children inside the refuge. This formal characteristic is less obvious. Safety is a perception created by certain conditions against known and unknown dangers.

Territorial reinforcement

The built form of the refuge will provide the primary safety of its residents and workers. This physical envelope should provide adequate shelter and protection from external dangers.

Access control

Location of doors and windows and security screens is important – users should have good access to outlook and external views while maintaining privacy for daily activities. A balance between providing privacy and safety and maintaining a sense of freedom and sightlines to the street and surrounds is required.

Technological surveillance

Security systems and resident-controlled access would free staff from continuous monitoring of entrances and exits. These systems could also increase safety for staff.

Layered entry

Using a sequence of gates and doors, thresholds to the exterior can be easily secured by users of the refuge when required. This also helps protect unattended children.

Clear sightlines

Clear sightlines allow parents to supervise their children without being in the same physical space, and also supports children's development of autonomy. Important visual connections include those between:

- kitchen and adjacent communal spaces
- kitchen and exterior space
- interior communal spaces and the outdoor play space
- bedrooms and laundry.

Control views through opening screens

Adjustable window blinds or shades provide resident control of both light and transparency. While visual connection to the outdoors is healing, too much visual access can be uncomfortable for someone who is in danger or recovering from trauma.

Safety in exteriors

Design of landscapes, fences and gates integrates the refuge with the streetscape without compromising safety of the internal spaces.

Safety at night

The use of digital surveillance and lighting strategies for laundry and garden areas at night increases user safety. Also consider inter-tenancy safety. Going to sleep knowing that no one can enter one's room also increases feelings of security.

Spatial layout

Logical, well-organised layout of rooms and circulation is important in managing levels of stress, confusion or disorientation for refuge users experiencing trauma. Ability to navigate through spaces with clear views of entrances and corridors has direct links to the perception of safety.

Use daylight to increase sense of safety and wellbeing

Abundant daylight and access to exterior views promotes wellness. Design the location of rooms, windows and skylights to maximise natural daylight and increase views of natural features. Placing windows strategically throughout the building provides a sense of connection between the inside and outside, while preserving a sense of security.



PRINCIPLE 2

Privacy

Intent

To provide a range of private areas, both real and perceived, of differing scales within the refuge without creating a sense of entrapment or isolation.

Suggestions

- Provide levels of privacy appropriate to the function of the space – some areas need basic interpersonal space, while others need complete physical, visual and acoustic privacy.
- Arrangement of levels and furnishings can assist in creating areas of individual or family privacy without isolating users.
- Provide operable window and door coverings for visual privacy. Screen views from neighbours by using landscaping and appropriate fencing.
- Manage noise transmission by using adequate acoustic insulation between living units, particularly for bedroom spaces.
- Provide spaces in the garden for private conversations.
- Separate office and counselling areas from dwelling areas.
- Provide alcoves and window seats, where possible, for personal space.

Background

Privacy is a key factor in providing a sense of safety, security and refuge. For women leaving violence, privacy is one of the most abused aspects of their daily lives. Personal space, the ability to think quietly, rest and parent effectively are often violated as a method of control. Providing respite, sanctuary and refuge in private spaces for residents is integral to healing from trauma, regaining autonomy, and being able to care for children.¹² Privacy also helps alleviate friction between residents and increases comfort and wellbeing levels. Lack of privacy is the most commonly reported issue in communal refuges.¹³

Levels of privacy

Adequate interpersonal distance is important for wellbeing and a sense of autonomy, particularly for mothers. The right to be “let alone” and to choose seclusion from attention, scrutiny or observation, particularly in one’s own home, is an important factor for those dealing with trauma. Privacy can range between complete solitude to intimate spaces suited for families or small groups. The careful design of screens and walls, and arrangement of furniture can provide diversity of privacy for women and children.

Visual privacy

Sliding screens, Dutch doors and shades allow residents to control their environment and level of social engagement. This makes it easy for residents to signal their openness to spontaneous socialising. Residents appreciate the ability to see who is in a communal space before entering it. Interior windows or cut-outs and open sight lines can accomplish this. Choosing when to interact is an essential component of self-determination.

Acoustic privacy

In a shared environment, minimising noise provides privacy and a sense of peace. Loud spaces make it difficult for residents to concentrate, families to engage in quiet activities, children to focus on homework, and residents to sleep. Ceiling and wall acoustic panels help reduce noise within a room. Solid core doors and door hardware, such as silencers, gasketing and weather-strips, all control noise transfer within the interior.

Storage in the communal kitchen

Individualised lockable storage in communal kitchens helps reduce conflict by allowing residents to control access and protect those with food allergies. It adds predictability and control to residents’ daily lives. Defined refrigerator space or an individual bar-fridge unit is also advisable.

Independent living units

Individual units provide opportunity for families to establish a routine, relax and eat together, and strengthen parent-child bonds. They also alleviate many conflicts associated with parental supervision and make parenting easier. Independent units provide normality in accommodation, as opposed to congregate living.

Private conversation spaces

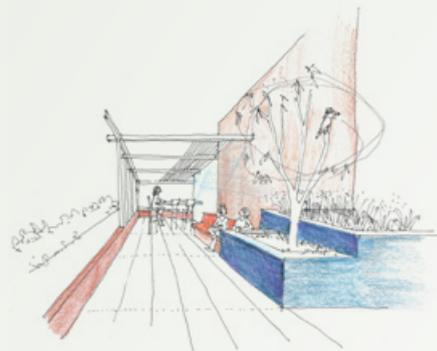
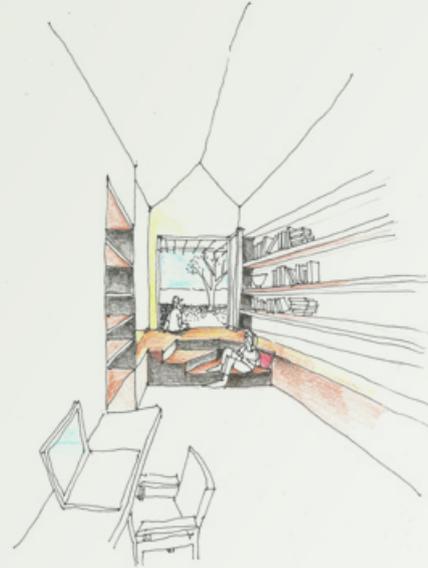
Small rooms allow for privacy for confidential conversations with residents, crisis calls and staff consultations with supervisors. Window blinds let users manage visual access and signal a need for privacy.

Alcoves and window seats

Alcoves allow residents to retreat from larger group situations. Window seats, alcoves and other peripheral spaces allow women and children to retreat but remain connected to the larger, communal space.

Drawing (top right): Arrangement of levels and furnishings can assist in creating areas of individual or family privacy without isolating users (sketch of Andrew Maynard's Tower House, Melbourne).

Drawing (bottom right): Provide well-designed and secure connections between internal and external spaces that are screened from the street. Encourage access to outdoor spaces for increased physical and mental wellbeing. Rooftop garden spaces provide a sense of privacy without entrapment.



PRINCIPLE 3

Dignity

Intent

To enable the development of a sense of self-worth, self-esteem, self-appreciation and self-confidence by providing considered, beautiful and healthy spaces within the refuge.

Suggestions

- Provide all spaces with abundant natural light and ventilation.
- Provide all spaces with views to landscape/external spaces.
- Provide good storage options for personal belongings, food, donations and toys.
- Create a sense of a 'resort' and being valued through abundant landscaping, places for reflection and harmonious spaces.
- Use colour strategically.
- Provide easy access to communal bathrooms/toilets.
- Good quality lighting in living, working and sleeping areas can instantly instil a space with a sense of dignity.
- A well cared for landscape promotes feelings of dignity.

Background

Dignity is an eclectic and ambiguous notion that cannot be precisely defined.¹⁴ Dignity refers to the basic right of a person to be valued, respected and treated ethically. Dignity is not the same as respect – it is our inherent value and worth as a human being. Respect, on the other hand, is earned through one's actions.¹⁵ To support the dignity of women and children escaping domestic violence requires an understanding of how dignity has been violated through humiliation, exclusion or dehumanisation.

In terms of space, dignity is an experiential quality rather than something that is built. Dignified spaces allow for users to feel valued, honoured and present. Consideration of materials, surfaces and environmental quality provides a sense of self-worth and positive reinforcement. Views and connections to well-designed exterior spaces promote wellbeing and dignity.

Natural light and ventilation

For women and children who have experienced extremely high stress, it is important to provide an environment that is designed to respond to trauma and considers subtleties that enhance wellbeing and dignity. Access to natural light and ventilation has been proven to improve mental wellbeing¹⁶ and is important to the healing process.

Access to views

Research shows that building environments that connect people to nature are more supportive of human emotional wellbeing and cognitive performance than environments lacking these features. Daylight, fresh air, indoor plants and landscape views all have positive impacts on building occupants.¹⁷

Sense of order

A sense of order is important for both residents and staff in a refuge. Well-ordered spaces and functions, logical room layouts and well-designed storage for objects all help to decrease anxiety for residents and staff. Limiting visual complexity, such as distracting patterns on the walls or flooring, may help decrease stress and anxiety. Ensure sight lines are unobstructed as much as possible to reduce perceived over-crowding. Avoid notices and posters if possible.

Beauty

Beauty can be integrated though links to nature, art, colour, proportion and materials. It does not have to be expensive or difficult to achieve. A sense of luxury can be created through landscaped spaces, well-designed links between interior and

exterior zones and use of quality materials and furnishings rather than ad-hoc fit-outs. Resorts are good examples of beautiful places to stay. Resort photos often showcase beautifully landscaped gardens, verandas and courtyards. These 'in-between' places provide spaces to sit and reflect, and give a sense of time to heal.

Colour

Colours can have positive associations and make a space feel uplifting, familiar and friendly. Wall and ceiling colours affect the brightness of a space; light colours reflect light and make a room brighter, while dark colours absorb light. Care should be taken to avoid high-intensity patterns or colours that may trigger those experiencing trauma. Colour and pattern should be culturally sensitive.

Access to amenities

Ample restrooms reduce stress and increase dignity. A private bathroom or shared bathrooms support morning and evening parenting routines, such as getting children ready for school or settled at bedtime.

Lighting

Lighting can have an instant effect on behaviour and mood in a room, through temperature choice and placement. Warmer yellow-toned light provides a sense of calm and homeliness, while cooler blue-tone light is good for tasks. Good lighting design has the capacity to make a room feel special.

Landscaping

Studies of outdoor landscapes provide evidence that the effects of nature on human health and wellbeing extend beyond emotional and cognitive functioning to social behaviour. Access to landscape provides a sense of freedom and connection to nature that is beneficial for mental health and healing, particularly for children.



Drawing: A sense of luxury can be provided through landscaped spaces, well-designed links between interior and exterior zones and use of quality materials and furnishings rather than ad-hoc fit-outs. Resorts are good examples of beautiful and dignified places to stay.

PRINCIPLE 4

Flexibility

Intent

To produce flexible, comfortable living arrangements that can be simply altered to suit families from diverse backgrounds and of varying sizes without compromising comfort and a sense of dignity.

Suggestions

- Arrange accommodation units with shared amenities so that flexibility in allocating large or small families to the units is possible.
- Communal areas should include smaller, adjoining spaces to allow for withdrawing to a protected area without being excluded from a communal activity.
- Provide flexibility by including communal and smaller tables in dining rooms.
- Provide flexibility in the layout of sleeping and living spaces for diverse family groups.
- Generous and diverse storage options help to maintain order.
- Flexible furnishings increase comfort and usefulness of even the smallest spaces.

Background

The ability for families from diverse backgrounds and experiences to live together relies on provision of a variety of spaces and flexibility in levels of interaction.

Accommodating small and large families

Flexible spaces with shared amenities make it possible to accommodate very large families, multiple smaller families, or several individuals. When individual apartments with private kitchens and bathrooms are not possible, smaller, shared units can keep the scale of communal living more manageable or adapt to house one very large family. The integration of sliding panels and movable furniture or screens can reconfigure spaces to suit family arrangements.

Communal areas

Offering a variety of seating options can allow residents to choose when to participate in group activities. Some women and children may not be emotionally or mentally ready to socialise with others. By offering nooks and smaller seating areas, women are able to stay at the edge of group. Rather than having seats oriented towards one focal point, small groupings may make more sense.

Parents and children need relatively distraction-free, cosy spaces to connect. The use of colour, position of furniture and rugs, and lighting can create boundaries within a larger room, providing clear zones without putting up barriers.

Dining areas

Communal dining tables and kitchens for residents to prepare food and dine together can create a strong sense of community, particularly for children.¹⁸ Flexibility in arranging tables either together or separately can promote confidence in social interactions. To provide flexible cooking arrangements, it is easier to have several smaller kitchens than one large kitchen serving multiple families.

Sleeping areas

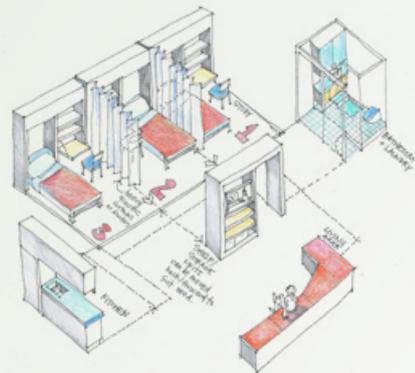
Layout of sleeping and living spaces in independent units or allocated bedrooms should consider the numbers and ages of children who will circulate through them. The ability to create more private sleeping areas for mothers or for teenage children will enable better rehabilitation. Design and integration of furniture elements that can double as storage and privacy screens can help temporarily subdivide larger spaces into smaller zones. Separating communal areas from sleeping quarters is important for the wellbeing of those needing quiet spaces.

Storage

Generous storage keeps communal spaces clean and comfortable. Storage of communal items allows access to resources such as art materials, books and games. In communal living refuges, individualised lockable storage helps residents safeguard their valuables and reduces conflicts over missing items.

Drawing (top right): Layout of sleeping and living spaces in independent units (like granny flats) provides the chance to create more private sleeping areas for mothers or for teenage children.

Drawing (right): The integration of sliding panels and movable furniture or screens can reconfigure spaces to suit family arrangements.



PRINCIPLE 5

Accessibility

Intent

To provide a facility that ensures equal access to a diverse range of physical, cultural, social and spiritual needs and promotes dignity and respect.

Suggestions

- Provide accessible living units to accommodate a range of body types and abilities.
- Consider the design of thresholds, steps, doors and bench heights according to access issues and AS1428.1:2009.
- Accessibility standards should be integrated for all internal and external spaces.
- Integrate seating arrangements in communal areas to accommodate different users' needs.
- Online access is needed for refuge users to connect to new employment, new housing options and to welfare.
- Pets require access to safe accommodation and can help in the healing process.
- Wayfinding helps maintain a sense of focus and independence. It needs to consider different language and cultural requirements.
- Communal spaces designed to be accessible to individuals and groups from the community, without compromising the safety of residents, can open up new opportunities for learning and support.
- Working beyond accessibility towards universal design principles¹⁹ is important.

Background

The refuge environment should be non-discriminatory and equally accessible to all users. Refuge services encounter diverse and complex needs, including mental health issues, disabilities, physical health issues, substance addiction history and trauma-induced stress disorders. Inclusion of users who experience mobility, sight, hearing or psychological issues requires nuanced design strategies.

Physical access issues

Mobility issues may be temporary or ongoing, and can include physical injuries, back problems and issues with balance. Residents will often be carrying toddlers or infants. Deaf or hearing-impaired users who rely on sign language need clear visual access. Provide cupboards and draws with accessible doors/pulls.

Flooring

Circulation spaces require careful attention for users with impaired mobility. Provide smooth, non-slip flooring in areas of high traffic. For stairs, provide deeper treads (275-300mm) and shallower risers (150-170mm) for comfortable and safe level changes. Where possible, provide at least one intermittent landing between floors, with no more than 11 risers between landings. Continuous handrails help safely negotiate stairs. Handrails 28 Steinfeld, E and Maisel, *Universal Design: Creating Inclusive* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012) should be available on both sides of stairs for added support. Consult AS 1428.1:2009 for necessary compliance outside these guidelines.

Laundry

Locate laundry facilities close to the exterior clothes-drying area, considering the needs of those with mobility issues or with children requiring supervision.

Bathrooms

Provide a step-free open shower area with a shower curtain, hand-held shower hose and a T-grab rail, recessed soap holders and semi-recessed toilet roll holders.

Kitchens

Provide under-bench removable joinery section in kitchenette (sink and cooktop area), a shallow kitchen sink (150mm deep), and cooktop controls at the front of appliance.

Furniture

Provide furniture that assists those who have injuries or physical conditions that make rising without something to push up on difficult. Provide furniture for parent-child interactions or for those with larger body sizes to be comfortable in.

Online access

Online access facilitates refuge users' ability to obtain work, manage finances, access welfare benefits, find housing and get information. Generally, residents arrive with their own computers or smart phones. Strategic placement of Wi-Fi hotspots in communal areas can also encourage interaction.

Access for pets and service animals

Accommodation for pets is becoming common for refugees and addresses the need for safety of pets and accommodation of service animals. Indoor or outdoor areas appropriate for dogs, cats, birds and fish should be integrated where possible. Designate rooms or units for people with pets/service animals and integrate materials that are easy to maintain, with washable rugs and furniture.

Wayfinding

An easy-to-navigate environment is particularly important for those who are anxious, depressed, or in crisis. Clear wayfinding helps people with short-term memory problems or other cognitive challenges. These issues are common in women who have sustained traumatic brain injuries from being beaten. Children also benefit from use of colours and images at their eye level that can help them stay oriented and serve as landmarks.

Cultural needs

To assist navigation and a sense of inclusion, signs and symbols should be able to be universally understood by people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. In some locations, the

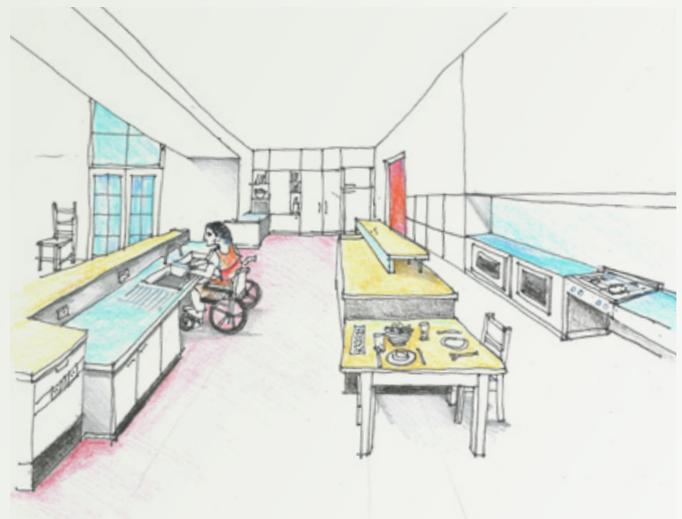
orientation of the entry and living spaces may have cultural implications, such as Fengshui or orientation to Mecca.

Community

Space for community meetings within the refuge facilitate connections that support residents to regain independence and social connection. This also fosters a sense of belonging between refuge users and community members alike.

Location and access to services

Ease of access to public transport, shopping centres, medical facilities, schools, community playgrounds, childcare centres and community spaces is vital for refuge users. A general sense of safety and good pedestrian and bike access is beneficial.



Drawing (above): By providing underbench space for wheelchair access, controls at the front of appliances, storage location made accessible and a variety of bench heights, diverse users' needs are accommodated. This is not difficult to achieve and goes a long way to making a space work well for all users.

PRINCIPLE 6

Child-focused

Intent

To focus on the diverse needs and spatial requirements of children in order to provide supportive and healthy spaces for healing and rehabilitation.

Suggestions

- Provide spaces designed specifically for children that promote safety, independence and agency appropriate to age and needs.
- Provide spaces that allow for mother-child interactions and ease of supervision.
- Provide individual kitchen/dining spaces for family meals.
- Locate exterior play equipment close to laundry areas for ease of supervision.
- Provide homework space for school-aged children that are quiet and focused.
- Locate space for teenage children to escape to – their needs are different to small children and adults
- Flexible furniture supports multiple types of activities and age groups.

Background

Children often outnumber adults within refuge accommodation, yet their specific needs and spatial requirements are not often privileged. Diverse ages, needs and abilities of children pose a complex spatial puzzle requiring an understanding of developmental psychology and environmental aspects specifically addressing the needs of children. Research shows that children who experience this kind of trauma are more likely to find themselves in similar situations as adults.²⁰ The provision of well-designed, supportive and healthy environments for children's healing and rehabilitation may reduce or stop this cycle completely. Protecting and nurturing the relationships between mothers and children is essential to recovery.

Play areas

Play areas or alcoves for young children separate from the 'living room' space allow children to expend energy without intruding on other residents' space. Alcoves can be created with furnishings, curtains, floor markings or transitions.

Kitchen areas

Individual kitchen/dining areas allow for control over what and when children eat and can bring normalcy back to family life.²¹ Mealtimes are often disrupted by abusers as a method of control, therefore reclaiming this routine in the refuge setting is important for mothers and children. Individual kitchens make it safer for children to be close to or to help a parent who is cooking, also strengthening the mother-child bond. Consider the safety of knives, cleaning supplies, cooktop controls, sharp edges/corners, electrical outlets.

Exterior areas

Outdoor spaces offer opportunities for physical activity, connection with other children, mother-child interactions, and supervised programs such as art or gardening. Sensory gardens can facilitate healing and offer solace. Providing well-designed landscaped areas for children is important to their sense of wellbeing, independence and curiosity.

Laundry management

Residents with young children or larger families have above average needs for laundry access. Each adult will wash approximately one load of laundry per day. Consider locating the laundry close to children's play areas for ease of supervision. Adequate drying space, both outside and within the refuge, needs to be integrated. Most refuges that were visited had two washing machines and two dryers on the premises.

Homework

Provide a quiet place within the refuge for homework, with tables to accommodate children and a supportive parent. Academic achievement is tied to resilience in children. In an individual unit, children can find a quiet spot to do homework and check in with their parent – who may be preparing a meal – as needed.

Teenage zones

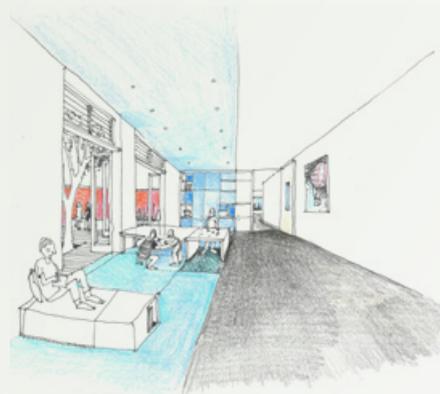
Separate spaces for teens address their need to complete homework, spend time alone, connect with friends or talk privately with a parent. While most communal living programs integrate spaces for young children, specific needs of teens can be accommodated with a 'teen room' which may include desks, internet access and places to sit. One refuge included a pool table and bean bags – this space was well used.

Appropriate furnishings

Furniture designed for children may include smaller tables arranged according to need. It should be without sharp corners and built with durable materials for longevity and safety. Rocking chairs are useful for self-soothing and parent-child bonding. A variety of seating and floor coverings provides options for socialising and for localised games.

Counselling areas

Children suffering trauma or anxiety need to be able to keep an eye on their mother during the initial stages of settling into the refuge. However, privacy is needed for the mother to communicate with refuge staff. By providing an adjacent room with a glass door, visual connection is maintained and acoustic separation protects children from difficult conversations. A specific sensory room for children can be integrated for counselling sessions.



Drawing (top): Academic achievement is tied to resilience in children. In an individual unit, children can find a quiet spot to do homework and check in with their parent – who may be preparing a meal – as needed.

Drawing (above): Furniture designed for children may include smaller tables arranged according to need. It should be without sharp corners and built with durable materials for longevity and safety. A variety of seating to provide options for socialising, and floor coverings for localised games.

PRINCIPLE 7

Sustainability

Intent

To provide well-designed spaces that respond positively to environmental conditions in order to maintain comfort and increase the sense of wellbeing for users.

Suggestions

- Provide built spaces that respond to solar access and wind prevalence.
- Design internal rooms for natural daylight access, ventilation and thermal performance.
- Select sustainable materials, fixtures and furnishings to maintain physical condition of the refuge and psychological wellbeing of the users.
- Locate trees or shade devices to west- and east-facing openings to control heat load in summer.
- Create sustainable garden spaces to extend living area potential for all users and improve sense of wellbeing and mental health.

Background

Sustainability is not just about environmental protection, it also refers to economic and social sustainability. Quality built environments foster good relationships and sense of belonging that build confidence – contributing to residents' ability to be happy and productive in the wider community long term.

Thermal comfort and design

Good thermal design provides a high level of human comfort, directly addressing a physical and psychological need for support and protection for refuge users. Reducing the need for heating in winter and cooling in summer increases the sense of calm and wellbeing within the refuge, thereby promoting more efficient recovery and rehabilitation. It also reduces the financial strain of artificially heating and cooling poorly designed spaces. A surprising number of refuges commented on the difficulty and expense of maintaining a comfortable temperature range within the sleeping and living areas, particularly in winter months.

Natural daylight

Access to natural daylight and direct sunlight reduces the need for artificial internal lighting and provides a more positive interior environment.

Natural ventilation

Likewise, controlled natural ventilation reduces the need for air-conditioning and improves the overall quality of air. Ceiling fans and windows that can be opened in living and sleeping areas provide comfort and a feeling of personal control over the space. In rooms with bunk beds wall-mounted fans could be used instead.

Temperature and lighting control

Control of temperature and lighting allows residents and staff to independently adjust levels in individual rooms according to personal comfort levels. A variety of lighting options can promote intimacy or assist in specific tasks. Desk or table lamps can provide needed focus, a pendant light over a dining table can promote intimacy. Temperature control should be flexible for efficient heating and cooling of spaces. Those who have experienced violence are sometimes more sensitive to temperature variants due to physical abuse or deprivation of heat or food.

A healthy interior for respiratory conditions

Use of natural finishes and air-tight construction minimises dust and toxin levels within refuge spaces, and also reduces the growth of mould. For asthma sufferers this greatly improves the quality of life in a refuge. Natural flooring like linoleum, low-toxin paints/sealants, and installation of window blinds rather than curtains are good strategies for managing air quality.

Landscape space

Careful design of sustainable landscape spaces is important. Transitioning refuge users may not be in a state to participate in the upkeep of these areas. Simple, easy to maintain landscaped areas can ensure longevity and improve the initial impression by presenting well maintained grounds and cared for landscape spaces. Exterior spaces in refuges visited for this report appeared to be the least maintained areas, refuge workers citing lack of time and finances to manage their upkeep. However, usage patterns of outside spaces tended to be high all year round. There was a common perception that vegetable gardens could provide positive engagement for refuge users. However, in the refuges visited the amount of time required to maintain vegetable patches reduced their effectiveness and most were left to refuge staff to manage in the long term. The provision of sustainable landscaped areas might promote increased use, improving the physical and mental health of tenants and staff. Landscaped courtyards and settings increase the sense of luxury and value to the visual and atmospheric quality of the refuge. Sustainable practices also aid in educating children about healthy living environments, which can strengthen resilience and outlook.



Drawing: Good thermal design provides a high level of human comfort, directly addressing a physical and psychological need for support and protection for refuge users. Reducing the need for heating and cooling increases a sense of calm and wellbeing, thereby promoting more efficient recovery and rehabilitation.

PRINCIPLE 8

Therapeutic space

Intent

To provide a series of spaces that promote consistency, predictability, healthy relationships and personal control to support the delivery of therapeutic care.

Suggestions

- Create a welcoming space that promotes safety and privacy, without impeding staff supervision.
- Provide sensory consultation rooms for children and adults.
- Reduce or remove excess visual stimuli – too much visual complexity can increase stress and anxiety.
- Reduce or remove environmental stressors including noise, flickering lights, strong odours, heat and vibrations.
- Promote connectedness to the landscape – ease of access to outdoors, natural light through windows and skylights.
- Provide a safe, quiet area for individuals in distress, separate from others.
- Promote a sense of choice and independence by providing levels of interaction in layouts (for example, a window seat adjacent a communal working/eating space).
- Use calm colour schemes that emphasise cooler spectrum colours like blues and purples, avoid large areas of white walls that may resemble a hospital interior
- Provide clear, consistent wayfinding and signage that is able to be understood by people from different cultural backgrounds and those with cognitive impairments and other disabilities.
- Do not overcrowd furniture and ensure adequate space to navigate around each piece.
- Institute a fragrance-free policy to eliminate synthetic fragrances, especially in enclosed spaces.
- Create a balance between social spaces and private spaces.²²

Background

Understanding the effects of violence on women and children is necessary in order to provide an appropriately designed refuge. Violence affects people differently depending on individual circumstances. Physiological responses to violence can include hypervigilance, hypersensitivity, listlessness, dissociation, depression, irritability and exhaustion. Physical impacts of violence can include chronic pain, mobility issues, gynaecological dysfunction, headaches, and autoimmune disorders caused by systematic physical and mental stress. For children, the effects of violence are particularly concerning as it can affect brain development and cognitive abilities.²³ Violence also affects responses to environmental factors. People suffering from depression are often cold because their blood pressure drops. Alternatively, people suffering from anxiety disorders tend to experience overheating.²⁴

Therapeutic environments promote physical, mental, and social health. They ensure physical safety. To support mental health, they emphasise consistency, predictability, and personal control. They also facilitate social connection, community building, and healthy relationships. This holistic approach aligns with the principles of therapeutic care to create a positive space for staff, women and children.²⁵

Sensory rooms

In newer services, providers are working to integrate therapeutic 'sensory rooms' specifically designed to help rehabilitate women and children who have experienced violence. These therapeutic rooms (modelled on Dutch 'snoezelen')²⁶ are set up as flexible 'play' rooms with places for individual or group activities, quiet discussion areas and specific therapeutic activities like sand-play or art workshops. Compared to traditional art rooms or workshop space, these sensory rooms have a particular focus on bodily responses to materials and surfaces, lighting, sounds and smell. The design of these rooms requires consultation with healthcare experts.

Creating a calm environment

A well-designed space provides an underlying sense of order. Minimise visual complexity caused by posters, notices, unnecessary patterns, waste and clutter. Environmental stressors, including noise, smell, vibration, flickering lights and heat also need to be managed, particularly in communal areas.

Sensory gardens

Access to nature promotes wellbeing. Research shows that nature, sunlight and views of landscape can help those recovering from violence. Plants are an important way of connecting occupants to the natural world, helping to reduce stress and pain, and improving mood.

Retreat

Provide 'quiet rooms' for respite from busy, noisy common areas and shared rooms. For women and children with mental health issues, larger communal spaces may be too stimulating. The ability to feel secure and in control of one's physical environment, and to choose when to be social and when to be alone or just with one's children, all facilitate healing from trauma and abuse.

Consultation

To encourage mutual respect between refuge workers and residents, provide similar chairs in consultation rooms to minimise any sense of power difference. Sitting face-to-face across a desk or table may be perceived as confrontational, whereas sitting corner-to-corner invites conversation and interaction. Natural materials and colours increase connection to nature and a sense of calm.²⁷

Social and private spaces

A balance of spaces for social interaction with spaces for reflection and calm supports refuge users working through levels of stress. Being able to relate to others is an important step in healing, but can be difficult to manage if the layout and atmosphere of the space does not consider these nuanced needs.



Drawing: To encourage mutual respect between refuge workers and tenants, provide similar chairs in consultation rooms to minimise any sense of power difference. Sitting face-to-face across a desk or table may be perceived as confrontational, whereas sitting in a calm, informal environment invites conversation and interaction.

PRINCIPLE 9

Sense of home

Intent

A sense of home, or place attachment, is an emotional bond that forms between individuals and their important settings. It is thought to have implications for a sense of wellbeing. Research has revealed categories of benefits including: memories, belonging, relaxation, positive emotions, activity support, comfort-security, personal growth, freedom, entertainment, connection to nature, practical benefits, privacy, and aesthetics²⁸. These are often restricted or eradicated for women and children living in a violent home. For this reason, the refuge aims to reinstate a sense of home, and therefore wellbeing.

Suggestions

- Create a welcoming entry – a positive sense of belonging starts with first impressions.
- Provide private areas and social spaces in the garden for quiet relaxation for both individuals and groups.
- Adequate storage for belongings helps create a sense of order and belonging.
- Adaptability for different users' requirements – sleeping or eating arrangements for different cultural needs.
- Ideally provide a small kitchen and dining area for each family, and if possible a small garden space adjacent the living area. Do not overcrowd furniture and ensure adequate space to navigate around each piece.

Background

A positive atmosphere and sense of 'home' can have a strong effect on the health and wellbeing of users who have fled violence. The sense of upheaval and dislocation experienced by women and children who have been forced to seek safety and shelter in an unknown environment is difficult to imagine. For some, home is a locus for everyday life, for others it is a repository for precious objects and memories. The refuge space can provide a sense of belonging by making the idea of home possible. Rather than aiming to replicate a generic

sense of home for users with radically diverse backgrounds and needs, the refuge can provide a stable place from which a new sense of home can be developed.

Entry zone

Calm, warm and welcoming fit-out and placement of furniture is important for making newcomers, especially children, feel like they belong. Soft lighting is easy to achieve in most existing foyers by using lamps or reflected light sources to create a soft ambience. Provide a place for seating, minimise posters/notices on the walls and reduce clutter by moving unnecessary objects. The entry zone is an important threshold that can help diffuse stress by instilling safety and privacy and a sense of homecoming. Refuge providers suggested the entry space provided a necessary interval between outside and inside, danger and safety, life 'before' and life 'after'. Maintaining order, ensuring lights were on at night (and on dark days) and that the circulation was clear from the front gate, through to the foyer were issues for refuge managers.

Space for quiet relaxation

A simple window seat can provide an area for one or two people to sit quietly and observe both inside and outside. Organising furniture to create small nooks (inside and outside) for quiet discussion between women, children and between workers and residents produces calm elements and a sense of belonging.

Storage

Objects of various scales and uses need to be stored on site. Consider places to keep personal belongings in bedrooms (wardrobe space, drawers), bathrooms (toiletries), kitchen items (perishable and non-perishable items) for feeding children. Children's toys tended to create major pressure points in many refuge services. Management of toys in communal play spaces was difficult to achieve. Simple joinery with symbols painted on doors to indicate contents, and

pull-out containers of toys that are easy for children to organise and put away can improve general tidiness and diffuse tension. Recent work to improve children and teenagers' social spaces within four of the 10 refuges visited has made obvious impact.

Kitchen

Kitchens within individual units allow residents to determine mealtimes and routines. Diverse cultural needs can also be easily accommodated with separate kitchen space. Communal kitchens can be great for providing a regular group meal, but are often a source of tension. Kitchenettes in individual living areas allow for a sense of home in the user's domain. Some refuge managers noted that residents invited each other over for coffee, showing a sense of community – a positive step in rehabilitation and social support. For communal kitchens consider: wider benchtops (standard = 600mm, wider = 750mm or 950mm); multiple cooktops; multiple fridges; lockable cupboards for residents' personal foods; multiple sinks; dishwashers; pictographic labels; and storage for high chairs, brooms and stools.

Exterior spaces

Providing well defined exterior zones that include furniture and sustainably planted areas will encourage refuge users and workers to access these outside spaces more, thereby extending the available space within the refuge and establishing a sense of belonging outside as well. This can be especially important for mothers with small children who need space to play safely outside. These areas can also include spaces for clothes drying, recreation, programs, outdoor dining and social activities.

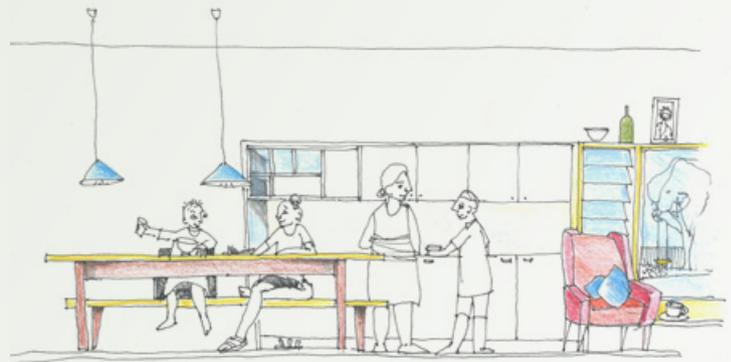
Finishes

Finishes typically used in single family homes are generally not durable enough to withstand the high volume of traffic in a refuge. Robust, easy to maintain finishes provide warmth

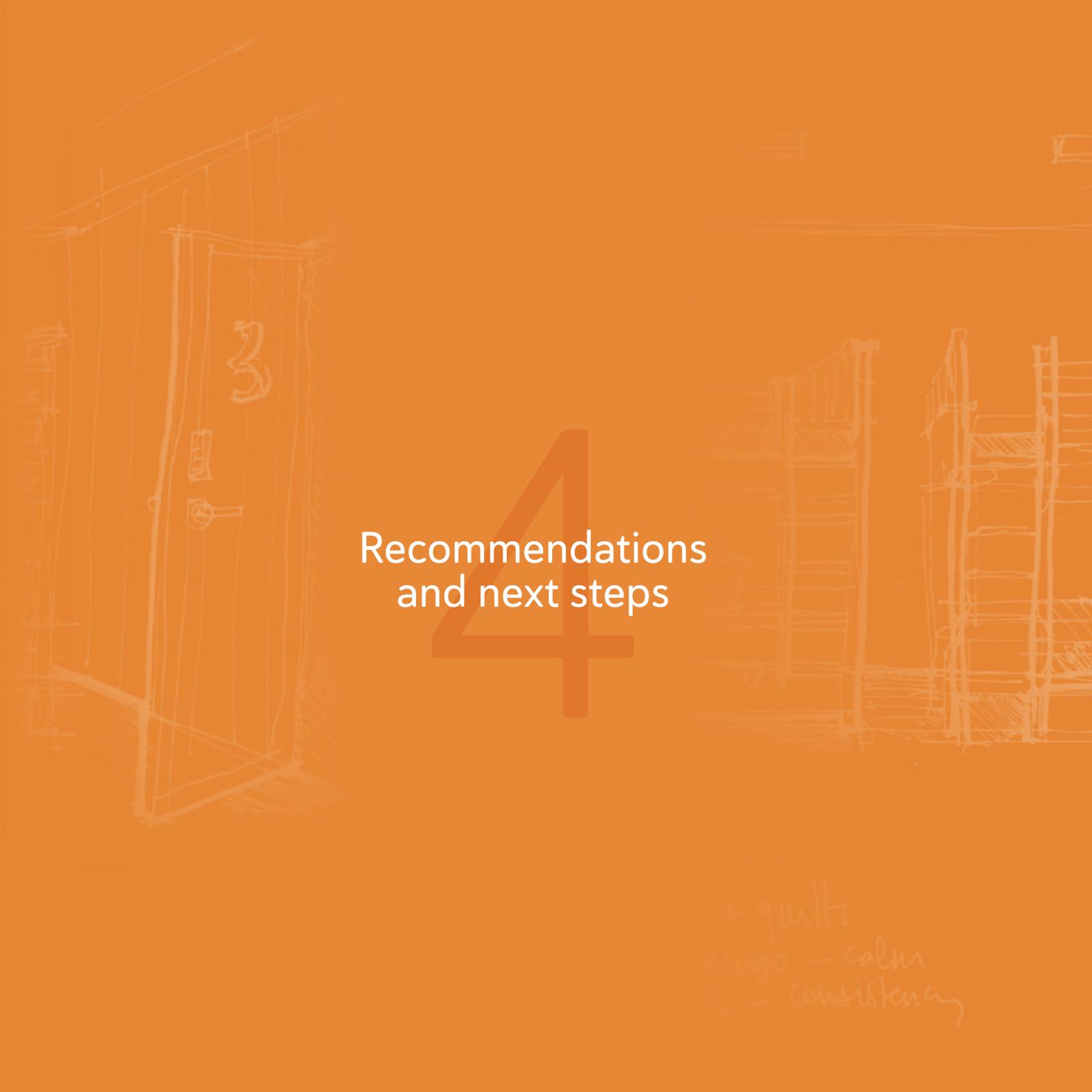
and sustainable fit-outs that are easy to maintain and not institutional. Consider using solid timber rather than veneers, area rugs as opposed to carpet, stainless steel or engineered stone countertops, porcelain as opposed to stainless steel for tubs and basins.

Donations

Large donations of clothing can overwhelm small rooms. Sorting clothing is not a good use of a staff member or volunteer's time. Some programs have created cooperative relationships with local community recycling stores in exchange for gift certificates. This alleviates the need for storage, sorting time, and management of clothing donations. Donations of furniture, linen, nappies and toys is appreciated by most accommodation services, but, again, management of surplus need is a constant issue. A centralised storage facility to provide transfer of donations between multiple refuge services is currently being considered.



Drawing: A positive atmosphere and sense of 'home' can have a strong effect on the health and wellbeing of users who have fled violence. For some, home is a locus for everyday life, for others it is a repository for precious objects and memories. The refuge space can provide a sense of belonging through making the idea of home possible.



Recommendations and next steps

+ quite
things - calm
- consistency

Implementation of the principles and suggested design strategies within this report depends on the individual buy-in or staff members and volunteers, and the investments in time and money that a service is able to make. Changes don't necessarily need to be big to be effective – anything that can be done to improve the experience of women and children leaving violence should be celebrated. Such improvements could range from making small changes to furniture layouts, installing new storage for toys or modifying lighting to renovating spaces more comprehensively or even building anew.

The key points to take away are:

- good design can promote safety and dignity in refuges
- engaging a multidisciplinary team of experts to fully explore options will result in more comprehensive solutions
- a better understanding of how architectural design can address the complex user needs in different types of refuge accommodation has the potential to aid the recovery of women and children who have experienced violence.

Strategy for action

Where to from here?

Next stages involve prototyping new ways of putting the design principles outlined in this report into practice. Continued testing will further engage designers, service providers and built environment experts in the process of designing, constructing and fitting out accommodation for women and children leaving violence.

Based on research undertaken during the project, we have developed four main objectives.

- **The development of a community of practice made up of service providers, stakeholders and building industry experts.**
This will encourage better built outcomes through collaboration, and build capacity by bringing together people who may not otherwise have a chance to discuss issues and opportunities in their field. Continued collaboration will encourage sharing of knowledge, experiences and expertise.

- **The use of the design principles in this report to improve the experience of living and working in existing refuge accommodation.**

Create more tailored internal and external spaces within existing sites, with a particular focus on safety and dignity. Improve the thermal performance of existing building stock. Increase focus on landscape-based projects and connections to the exterior as a first step in improving experiences of spaces within the refuge for both tenants and staff, and in particular for children.

- **The development of new accommodation types by working with stakeholders and service providers.**

Create more sustainable, efficient and cost-effective building stock. Use design principles to support funding for new premises, and to ensure quality and practicality of outcomes based on research. Test accommodation types, such as tiny houses, modular housing and apartments to establish a more diverse range of housing for women and children. Co-design new types of accommodation with better knowledge of user needs.

- **The development of strategies for using 'meanwhile space' or intermediate accommodation options.**

Make connections with philanthropic sources to locate opportunities for unused spaces to be adapted and used effectively as accommodation or support space. Engage with communities to work towards establishing recognised safe spaces within localities.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- a community of practice supports the ongoing research and development of accommodation types.
- further research be undertaken on user needs in areas not included in this report, particularly in regional and remote locations in NSW and Australia.
- further research be undertaken into the needs of specific user groups—for example, children, teenagers, women on short-term visas, women with disabilities, those experiencing mental health issues and cultural needs of women from diverse backgrounds.

- support is sought from experts and policy makers in the areas of social and community housing, communities and justice and family and community services
- the design principles framed in this document be integrated into new built and existing refuge service accommodation where possible
- the effectiveness of design principles in achieving the stated goals/intentions of this report be evaluated to further clarify specific user needs of those in refuge accommodation and achieve quality outcomes

- future pilot projects be undertaken to refine the principles outlined in this report – temporary, modular and flexible accommodation types should be tested in diverse contexts.

While this project proposes a clear focus for change, there is still much work involved to develop, implement and roll-out initiatives. This requires a broader engagement beyond the current UTS community, but action is both possible and urgently needed.

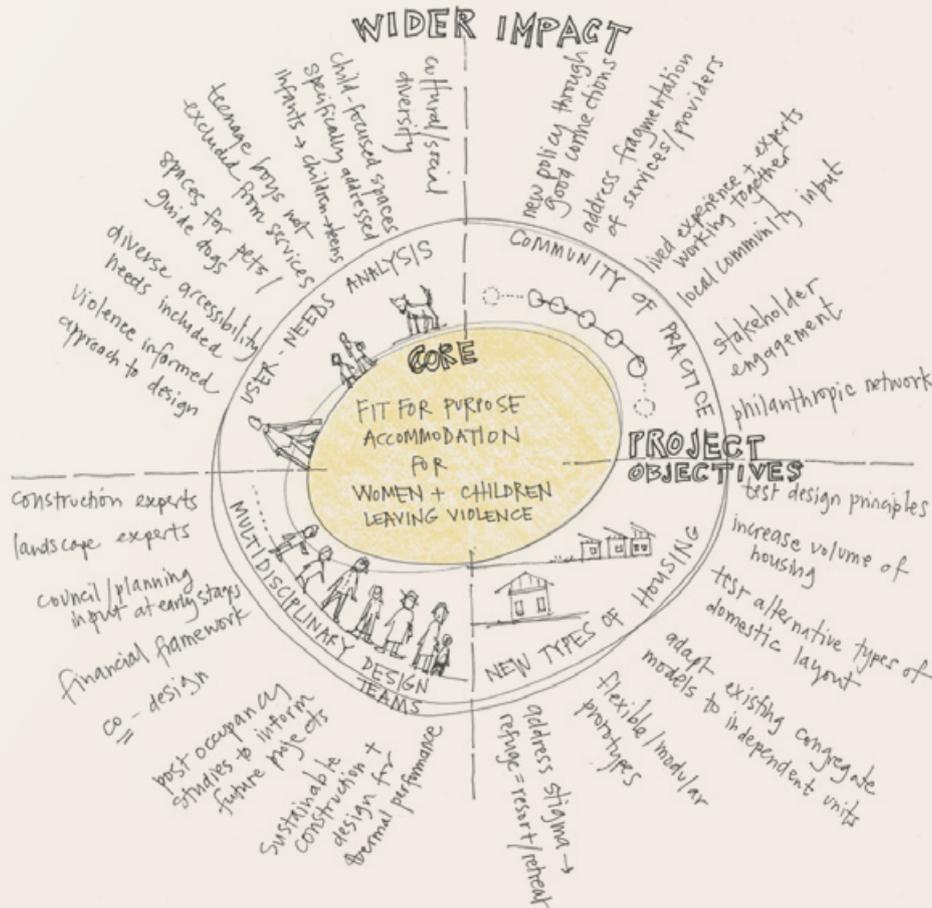


Diagram: Vision with project objectives and wider impact outcomes to show possible relationships between strategies.

Glossary

In the context of this study the following terms need clarification:

Women's refuge

A place of temporary protection and support for women and children escaping domestic violence and intimate partner violence of all forms.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence refers to acts of violence that occur between people who have, or have had, an intimate relationship. While there is no single definition, the central element of domestic violence is an ongoing pattern of behaviour aimed at controlling a partner through fear, for example by using behaviour which is violent and threatening. In most cases, the violent behaviour is part of a range of tactics to exercise power and control over women and their children, and can be both criminal and noncriminal. Domestic violence includes physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse.²⁹ Domestic violence may be termed 'intimate partner violence' when committed by a spouse or partner in an intimate relationship against the other spouse or partner. In this report, heterosexual relationships are the primary focus. Violence experienced in same-sex relationships is acknowledged but is not the focus in this report.

Family violence

Violence committed by someone against a family member or members, as well as violence against an intimate partner. It involves the same sorts of behaviours as described for domestic violence. The term 'family violence' is the most widely used term to identify the experiences of Indigenous people because it includes the broad range of marital and kinship relationships in which violence may occur.³⁰

Women

The word *woman*, or *women*, in this research refers to female adults, but recognises that this group is not homogenous. Women are diverse, their experiences are affected by cultural background, socioeconomic status, where they live, sexuality, disability, and age. The term is inclusive of all women, including cis-women, trans-women, and intersex women.

Perpetrator

The term *perpetrator* reinforces the serious nature of domestic, family and sexual violence. For the purposes of this report, the term is intended to cover men who commit one or more identified acts of domestic or family violence against women and their children, or sexual violence against women, whether or not they have ever been arrested, charged with a crime, or had an intervention order issued against them.³¹ According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), around 95 per cent of all victims of violence, whether women or men, experience violence from a male perpetrator. Women as perpetrators are therefore not the focus of this study.³²

Victim or Survivor

As this report focuses on male perpetrators, this term is used to describe women and their children who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence by a male perpetrator. In this research, the phrase 'women who experience violence' will be used as it labels the behaviour perpetrated against the women rather than the woman herself and acknowledges the efforts many victims of violence make to protect themselves and their children from domestic and family violence.³³ It should be acknowledged that men also experience violence, but that this does not form part of the scope of this study.

Homelessness

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) statistical definition of homelessness states that when a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations. In this research, this definition also extends to women and children who are living in a house in which danger prevents them from exercising basic human rights as stated above.

Trauma-informed

The definition of trauma has been extensively debated to try to classify the effects of trauma at a broad level. The current definition states that trauma includes experiences of violence (such as robbery or terrorism), natural disaster (including bushfires, earthquakes and flooding), interpersonal violence (rape, suicide or child abuse) and accidents (involving motor vehicles or workplace events).³⁴ However, this definition fails to adequately address effects of violence perpetrated by another human on an individual – in this case on a woman and her children.



Footnotes

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