

Making and Unmaking a Rooming House: Unison and 'Marj Oke'

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Loathe them or live in them (or both), rooming houses are part of the history and future of Australian housing. At the time of writing they continue to change operators and geographic distributions but show few signs of aggregate decline.¹ Amid this wider history the status of rooming houses in the not-for-profit housing sector has changed considerably. After several decades of close association, social housing providers and rooming houses have, in effect, separated but not completely divorced, citing irreconcilable differences and with the division of assets taking many years.

A substantial cohort of not-for-profit rooming houses in Victoria, both past and present, trace their organisational roots back to the 1980s, when the state government embarked upon an unprecedented and unrepeatable buy-up of grand buildings to be operated as rooming houses by community groups. These large buildings often had longer histories as private rooming houses, de-licensed hotels, and former institutions, firmly shaped by government policy and closely linked to the experiences of people at the social or economic margins.

This is illustrated in the 'house biography' of a Fairfield property owned and operated by Unison Housing, still known colloquially as 'Marj Oke.'

A 'house biography' refers to the task of tracking a particular house over time, through its different occupants, uses and modifications. House biographies highlight the fact that homes are constantly made, unmade, and remade, and that their existence and configurations are linked to wider social, economic, and legal factors.² The details about accommodation

offered within them, particularly the differing levels of private space, provide telling evidence of the intentions of their operators.

The main building on Unison's Fairfield property, first known as 'Carmelea', was built in 1893 and until 1921 was the private home of confectioner MacPherson 'Mac' Robertson, inventor of the Freddo Frog and Cherry Ripe, and a well-known philanthropist.³ The use and configuration of Carmelea in this time — ample, open, conspicuous — would contrast markedly with later eras.

From 1922 to 1973, Carmelea was operated as a maternity home for unmarried mothers, known, among various euphemisms, as the Girls' Memorial Home. It was operated by the Methodist Central City Central after being donated by Dr Georgina Sweet.⁴ The Girls' Memorial Home was an example of a new style of maternity home focused on secrecy. The operations of these maternity homes, beginning in the 1920s, were closely linked to the status of unmarried mothers and the use of adoption legislation as a social policy. The operations of the Girls' Memorial Home mirror the peak period of adoptions in Australia.⁵ Many factors contributed to its closure, but a crucial tipping point was the 1973 introduction of the single parent pension. Equivalent facilities run by the City Mission and the Salvation Army also closed in 1973.

As a secretive maternity home, Carmelea was configured as dormitories, the hallmark of institutional accommodation. It retained the superficial appearance of a wealthy home,

but the grounds were hidden behind a hedge and guests could not leave without permission.

From 1973 to 1987 Carmelea operated as a women's refuge named 'Georgina House'. The building was retained by the Mission but repurposed to provide emergency accommodation. This quickly evolved to cater primarily to women and children escaping domestic violence.

When running as a refuge, Carmelea was hidden behind a tall wooden fence, a fortress on a budget, and partitions were installed within existing rooms to provide semi-privacy. The partitions were a pragmatic improvisation in a crowded building, but also signalled to the women that hopes for their future accommodation did not rest on a rapid return to married life. Kitchens and bathrooms remained shared. Staff hoped communal meals would foster camaraderie. This was rarely the case.

Georgina House did not close for lack of demand, but by the late 1980s recognition of domestic violence had developed sufficiently that there was a wider network of refuges in place. Deinstitutionalisation was also important. In 1984 the Mission resolved to divest from institutional buildings and in 1987 sold Carmelea to the Director of Housing. The refuge moved to separate premises and formally separated from the Mission in 1990.

Thereafter, Carmelea shared much in common with other not-for-profit rooming houses in Victoria, one of dozens of grand old buildings acquired by the Ministry of Housing. Having entered the

rooming house market in the early 1980s, by 1987–1988 the Ministry owned 43 community-run rooming houses, totalling 818 beds and thus averaging a large number of occupants per building.⁶ Relatedly, the 1983 Housing Act contained provisions for not-for-profit housing operators, the genesis of many social housing providers in operation today.

By most accounts, not-for-profit rooming houses were less bad than for-profit rooming houses, but they were never easy. This was true at Carmelea, soon known as ‘Marj Oke.’

From 1990 to 2019 Carmelea operated as a not-for-profit rooming house for women, first named ‘Marjorie Oke’, after a Fairfield resident and activist (who later joined the committee of management). Rhonda Wilson’s 2007 oral history compilation, *Shelter*, is a key reference for the operations of Carmelea this era.⁷

As a rooming house, residents had their own bedrooms. However, they shared living areas, kitchens and bathrooms. On paper, the shared spaces were a compromise between privacy and budget; in practice, they presented problems greater than the sum of their parts. Shared spaces were sites of stress, conflict, and security issues. However, it was hoped that these would be short-term difficulties for tenants, because they would progress to affordable private or public housing. In later years, this became less realistic.

With the luxury of hindsight, we can recognise some naivete in 20th century community rooming house operators. With good intentions and hard work, they found that no good deed (especially in rooming houses) goes unpunished. Bev, the on-site manager from 1989 to 1997, later concluded that ‘*rooming houses are just bloody hard places to work*’, and that in spite of the enthusiasm with which the rooming house was established in the late 1980s, ‘*the committee and myself were absolutely staggered by the number of problems that we encountered*.’⁸

In the 1990s the Victorian State Government ceased its acquisitions

of potential rooming house buildings. By the late 2000s, government and social housing providers were actively divesting from rooming houses and converting large numbers of buildings to self-contained accommodation. The great costs of these conversions were offset by the evidence that rooming houses exhibited poor outcomes for tenants.

Concurrently, the ownership history of ‘Marj Oke’ presents a snapshot of the significant restructuring and amalgamation affecting many social housing providers. By 2014 it was owned and operated by Unison Housing.

The Unison 2017–20 strategic plan committed to conversion of all its rooming houses, and the 2017 Unison Annual Report noted that they had lodged planning permits to convert the Fairfield site and ‘... *replace outdated accommodation with good quality self-contained units close to amenities*.’⁹

In 2021 ‘Marj Oke’ will re-open as self-contained apartments for women. Communal areas have been demolished. A new, four storey apartment building will cover the footprints of the demolished areas. Both the new apartment building, and Carmelea itself, will contain a mix of one-bedroom and studio apartments. Each of the 38 apartments has its own bathroom, kitchen and laundry. This design acknowledges that private spaces are exponentially less stressful than shared spaces, and that social housing is expected to be long-term, in lieu of affordable housing options elsewhere.

Social housing providers inherited much from the 20th century, including the mixed blessing of some grand old rooming houses. With large capacities, and located close to amenities, they have been islands of affordability in seas of inflated house prices that preceding operators could scarcely have imagined. But their rooming house formats have caused innumerable headaches, for tenants and staff alike.

History has not been kind to the choice to invest in not-for-profit rooming houses (and

even less to secretive maternity homes). However, the rationale for the 1980s acquisitions — that there were diminishing housing options for single people on low-incomes — was entirely correct, and unfortunately, is still pressingly relevant.

In recent years, private rooming houses have opened as quickly as social housing providers have embarked on conversions. This is an understandable outcome when one considers the absolute-zero of affordable private rental options for single people on low-incomes, but it is far from ideal. Whatever response emerges to this situation in the future, no doubt this will be expressed in reconfigurations of walls and spaces, just as at Carmelea/‘Marj Oke.’

Endnotes

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