

‘Build it, Fill it, Bill it’: A brief history of how housing work has changed (and stayed the same)

When I started with the commission, we were busy as hell with the last stages of construction of estates and high rises. Not much planning was done about what actually happened when tenants arrived; we could barely stop to take a breath. The unofficial motto was “build it, fill it and bill it.”

(Interview with former Housing Worker).(Chalkley, 2004a)

Introduction

This paper is a discussion around how a history of problems with the *‘building, filling and billing’* of Public Housing have shaped the role and responsibilities of current housing workers in Victoria. One of the challenges of writing about the history of housing work is the fact that there is a tendency for housing literature, particularly in historical accounts, to focus on economic, planning and finance matters rather than the social aspects of day to day work of housing staff (Jones, 1985). With a few exceptions, (Clapham et al., 2000, Hayward, 1996, Dalton, 1988, Richards, 1990) housing research literature in Australia contains little record of how housing workers experience problems, how they apply personal discretion to decision-making and more broadly, how they experience and understand the changing nature of their work. The literature used in this paper draws from the work of Howe, (a history of fifty years of public housing in Victoria), a fascinating (and difficult to cite) Estate Officer training handbook from the late 1960’s and a number of old reports, papers and journals. These documents provide an interesting insight into how the understandings and perceptions of past housing managers have become part of the structure of the organisation; they describe entrenched and persistent problems that are subject to constant reinterpretation and negotiation.

In addition to the documents mentioned above, this paper also draws on ethnographic data gathered from interviews with a small group of retired housing workers. By synthesising the stories of these workers with the artifactual evidence contained in the literature, this paper works to construct a multilayered account of the history of housing work.

The structure of this paper was inspired by a comment from one of the retired housing workers; in his interview he described how his job changed over time; moving from ‘expand, build and develop’ during the construction boom, into ongoing maintenance and repair of aging housing stock and eventually, the supervision of housing workers as they negotiate increasingly complex tenancies.

In his stories, he told me how in the early part of his career with ‘The Commission’ (that is the Victorian Office of Housing, and its predecessors) the unofficial motto was to **‘build it, fill it and bill it’**. The aim of this paper is to examine how changes to housing work (**‘building, filling and billing’**) is represented in historical literature and how housing managers and staff might use these representations to make sense of their work.

1) *'Build it'*.

Just why does the State build Public Housing?

To some degree, the rationale for the construction of Public Housing in Victoria has not changed. A scarcity of affordable housing forces the most vulnerable members of the community to exist '*under deplorable conditions*' with the burden of impoverished housing '*falling most heavily on those least able to bear it*'. (Barnett and Burt, 1942) In an effort to address the problem of the poor living under 'deplorable' conditions, the Housing Commission, established in 1937, was charged with the task of assessing how slum housing impacts on the welfare of individuals and the consequences of 'slum minded' behaviour on society in general. The slum reform movement produced a number of reports and papers that, had they not been interrupted by the war, may have proved to be more influential. But the work of social reform was short lived and from 1945, expansion and construction was to preoccupy the engineers and architects employed by the Housing Commission.

The influence of engineers and architects as 'managers' resulted in a noticeable transformation in the culture of the organisation; the brief focus on social welfare and slum reform was replaced by the technical language of planning, building and construction. The engineers and architects were in charge. During this time, two important things happened in the structuring of the organisation: the critical mass of the operational workers (the front line) were builders, engaged in the construction and commissioning of new dwellings; and as the old commissioners (the 'social reformists') retired, they were replaced by managers whose qualifications, skills and interests were in the area of building, construction and programmed development. (Dalton, 1988)

As a consequence of this 'domination by builders' the majority of housing discourse from this period is written in the language of construction. The 1958 '*Report on Some Aspects of Housing Overseas*' provides the reader with some insight into the organisational significance of 'construction discourse'. The report explored; *Construction and Management of Multi-story Flats, Slum Clearance and Reclamation, The Use of Light Weight and prestressed Concrete in house and flat construction.* (Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958). This saturation of 'construction discourse' was also reflected in the stories of the retired housing workers:

In the 1960/70s , the culture of the public works engineers was nothing like the housing staff, the engineers were building million dollar projects and the housing guys were responsible for piddly little jobs, the blocked sinks. They just didn't get on.

(Interview with former Housing Worker). (Chalkley, 2004b)

The 'narrative of building' dominates early housing literature and construction remains a central focus in the organisational literature until well into the late 1970s. (Australian Army Education Service, 1948, Barnett and Burt, 1942, Howe, 1988b) As a result of the saturation of 'construction discourse', housing staff had little time (or need) for the development of a discursive framework to express the emerging challenge of managing properties for people with multiple and complex needs.

2) *'Fill it'*.

'The Deserving Poor':

The challenge of selecting 'good' tenants while helping those at risk.

Literature concerning the selection of 'appropriate and worthy tenants' is relatively prolific; reports such as *'Housing the Australian Nation'* (Barnett and Burt, 1942), *'The problem of Housing Victoria's Elderly Tenants'* (Housing Commission Victoria, 1966) and *'The enemy within our gates'* (Housing Commission Victoria, 1966) provide the reader with an insight into how housing managers have justified their allocations.

The terminology used to represent tenants has changed a number of times and public housing tenants are represented in many ways; as *'Slum dwellers'* (Australian Army Education Service, 1948), *'The Housing Poor'* (Barnett and Burt, 1942), *'Applicants and Ballotees'* (Housing Commission: Victoria, 1949), *'Occupants'* (Housing Commission Victoria, 1966), *'Tenants'* (Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958, Henderson, 1975), *'Clients'* (Ministry of Housing; Task Force on Housing Policy Review, 1979) and most recently *'Customers'* (Office of Housing, 2004).

The terminology used to portray 'public housing tenants' is important because these definitions are 'laid down' over time and 'sedimented' (Crompton and Jones, 1988) into the culture of the organisation. Ethnographers use the concept of 'sedimentation' to illustrate how, like sand on a beach, socially constructed meanings are a layered over time. The meanings and constructions in this 'discursive sediment' have been used by generations of housing workers as they attempt to make sense of their work.

In 1948, the narrative of the early sediment was judgemental and moralistic:

Mr Barnett found that most slum dwellers in Fitzroy were British born. Most had slum parents. Mr Barnett found that the majority of these people were slum-minded – that is, slovenly and vicious. Most did not earn enough to live on.
(Australian Army Education Service, 1948)

One year later, Warner attempts to be a little more 'scientific' in his description of people who require housing:

The following types present problems in slum areas and in emergency camps;

- a) *habitual drunkards*
- b) *sexual perverts*
- c) *sub-normals.* (Housing Commission (Victoria), 1949)

By 1967, the Estate Officers Manual provides housing staff with a less judgmental and more descriptive list of the segments in which potential tenants might be considered:

- 1) *The Deserted Wife.*
- 2) *The Aborigine Tenant.*
- 3) *Persons Not Fully Employed.*
- 4) *Self Employed Persons*
- 5) *Seasonal Workers.*
- 6) *Unemployed.*
- 7) *Elderly Tenants.* (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967)

Some twenty years later, as the newly-formed Ministry of Housing and Construction (1988) struggled to come to terms with an increasingly diversified tenant base, a new

lexicon emerged. During this period terminology such as: '*The de-institutionalised*', '*the frail elderly*', '*homeless young people*', '*shared housing*', '*youth housing*' and '*group housing*' comes to dominate the housing literature.(Carter, 1988)

By 2006, the discourse had changed again; the classification of tenants progressed from a description of individual tenants to a broader description of the circumstances that lead to the request for housing assistance. People considered for early housing (those most likely to be housed) were defined by the circumstance that caused their housing crisis and were considered in the following segments:

Recurring Homelessness: *Some people have trouble finding housing in the private rental market because they have a very poor tenancy history. Other people may have trouble finding housing because they lack important living skills; have behavioural problems or social and relationship issues.*

Supported Housing: *People living in unsuitable housing who have high support needs or need major disability modifications in the home.*

Special Needs Housing: *If current housing is unsuitable for a variety of personal, health or safety reasons. Special needs include people with insecure, unsafe and inappropriate housing and those with urgent medical needs.*
(Department of Human Services, 2007)

The following section examines how sedimented discourse (such as the above) are used by housing workers to describe and explain who are 'public housing tenants'.

So, who precisely is the 'Typical Public Housing Tenant'?

To some extent, the definition of those eligible for Public Housing has not changed. In 1939 those eligible for public housing were 'persons of limited means' (Barnett and Burt, 1942) and in 1949 only families earning less than £520 per annum could apply for housing.(Housing Commission: Victoria, 1949). In 1967, an applicants' income continued to be the primary eligibility requirement, '*Section 21 states: Eligible Person means a person who, in the opinion of the Commission is, or was at the time of his first becoming a tenant of a house under this act, by reason of his financial circumstance, in need of assistance*' (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967).

In 1967, the 'Estate Officers Training Manual' outlined a simple definition of a typical public housing applicant; '*The commission is required to give preference to housing families of low or moderate income*'. From this definition, the manual then divides tenants eligibly into income and accommodation requirement categories; Lone Persons (pensioner), Childless Couples (pensioner), Childless Couples (non-pensioners), 2 bedroom, 3 bedroom and Large Family. (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967). This categorisation of tenants according to their marital status and family constitution continued to be an accepted practice well into the 1980s and to some degree, the allocation of properties by matching 'tenant type' to 'accommodation type', continues today.

By 2004, there was little change to eligibility; only those on very low incomes were eligible to apply for Public Housing. The 2005 Public Housing National Social Housing Survey found that for 81% of the main household earners, the main income source was a government pension or benefit of some sort. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2006) In order to apply for public housing in 2007, applicants must be '*on a*

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low income and cannot find suitable housing to rent privately, you can apply to rent public housing' (Office of Housing, 2007).

It would appear that Public Housing has always been, and will always be, 'housing for the poor'.

The absence of a clearly identifiable, linear discourse around the changing nature of tenants was, in part, due to shifting foci for the managers of public housing in Victoria. The preoccupation with planning, construction, disposal and asset management that occupied the Office of Housing for most of this century, meant that until the late 1980s, there was little literature about the complexity of tenant needs.

Managers and housing commentators in the 1990s used new narratives to describe tenants and phrases such as ; '*complex needs*', '*precarious tenancies*', '*individual case plans*', '*interagency cooperation*' and '*participants*' became more frequent and accepted as popular idioms. By 2004, transformation of housing discourse was complete; the Housing Office Review formalised a new relationship between the housing worker and the tenant; the language of 'customer service', 'case management' and 'high and complex needs' was the dominant discourse (at Head Office anyway). (Office of Housing, 2004)

'Holding one hand and smacking the other':

Are Housing Officers 'Social Welfare Workers' or 'Property Managers'?

The Estate Officer...he is the man to whom they pay their rent and give their maintenance complaints. He is the man who directs them to improve their house-keeping standards, get rid of the illegal boarder or even vacate the premises.
(Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967)

Housing narrative from the early part of last century described tenants as the 'deserving poor', 'slum dwellers' and 'deserted mothers' (Barnett and Burt, 1942). The literature of this time was primarily concerned with the impact of tenant's on society; little attention was paid to the underlying reasons such categories exist and how housing might respond in a manner that goes beyond reclamation and construction. But not entirely. A number of housing managers and commentators suggested that housing reform might need to move beyond hygiene, sanitation, building and reclamation. In their lengthy report on concrete, cladding and rendering, Gaskin and Burkitt made the following recommendation:

(a) At least one qualified and experienced Social Welfare worker should be appointed to the Commission's staff. Principal (sic) duties would be to deal with difficult welfare cases referred to her by the Housing Officers and in turn put the families concerned in touch with appropriate existing outside welfare agencies whether State or Private

(b) The Housing Officers themselves should undertake a course of instruction in Social Welfare work. This could possibly be arranged via the Social Studies department of the University. (Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958)

This proposal was significant as it echoes the sentiments in a recommendation made by the Minister for Housing some ten years earlier:

Some of the people in the slums will also be below average quality. I suggest that a committee should be established to consider how this problem might be solved. This committee might operate under the

auspices of the Housing Commission and should consist of a number of experienced welfare workers. I do not believe that the problem can be solved by taking the worst cases and putting them, with out attention, into new Housing Commission Homes at the tax-payers expense.

(Housing Commission (Victoria), 1949)

And further reinforces the Army's Education Service assertion that policy guidelines for the housing of public tenants should be considered as a form of 'welfare housing':

Two main classes of people must be provided for in housing policy. The first, the "sub-economic" class, are people who will never be able to buy a decent home, and who without some assistance are condemned to live always in the slums. (Australian Army Education Service, 1948)

Finally, this statement was significant because it is not so different from the earlier comments of Barnett and Burt:

The problem of the "Sub-economic" tenant is largely the problem of poverty. That problem is linked up with unsanitary housing, slum abolition and reclamation, and the enforcement through the States of Health powers and standards in relation to Housing. The problem in every sense is wholly a "Social Service" problem. (Barnett and Burt, 1942)

The documents used to inform this paper contain a number of forewarnings about the changing nature of the 'public tenant', and this might suggest that people with 'multiple and complex needs' (Victorian Auditor General, 1996) are not new to the system, nor should they be a surprise to the managers of public housing in Victoria. These historical reports and papers contain an artifactual record of discourse used by generations of housing managers as they struggled to formulate policy around 'who' should be allocated increasingly scarce public properties.

In many of the documents utilised in this paper, two phenomena are cited as contributing to 'public housing' becoming 'welfare housing': Firstly, at some point, each and every report signals a growing level of disquiet concerning the States inability to provide the volume of housing stock needed to meet current and future demand; and secondly, the majority of reports cited here acknowledge that the segmentation of applications will result in the allocation of scarce public housing to the neediest and most precarious people on the waiting list.

Finally, and most importantly for the work of housing staff, the combination of these two factors has led to the 'concentration and segregation of the poor; to inhibit the viability of shopping, employment and to identify and 'stigmatise' public housing clients'. (Ministry of Housing; Task Force on Housing Policy Review, 1979).

3) ***'Bill it'***.

Rebates, Rent, Patching Up, Managing Tenants and a 'Thousand Other Things'

The calculation of a rental rebate has long been the first action undertaken by a housing worker when establishing a new tenancy. 'Rebating' is a formulaic procedure that tailors weekly rent to a fair and reasonable proportion of the tenant's income. The rationale for this system is simple; the rebate system generates a 'tenant by tenant' rental charge that starts at full economic rent and is systematically rebated to a predetermined proportion of their income. In theory (and in practice) four different sets of tenants living in the same

block of flats might be paying four different rents and as their circumstances change, so will their rent. Rebates are perceived as making rents equitable, flexible, and tailored to the circumstances of individual tenants. They are also exceptionally complex. (Office of Housing, 2004)

The literature shows that this complexity has long been a problem for housing workers and discussions about the problems with rebates are not new; as early as 1942, housing commentators remarked on the organisations ability to administer the rental rebate system:

In the opinion of the Authors the rental rebate system adopted in Victoria has disclosed inherent defects; - (a) it is not directly related to subsistence requirements of the tenant for the reason that the cost of living and the basic wage varies considerably from time to time; (b) it presents difficulties in administration and (c) it is not easily understood by tenants, thereby tending to create dissatisfaction and misunderstanding.

(Barnett and Burt, 1942)

And some twenty five years later, the Estate Officers Manual dedicated an entire chapter to the complexity of rebates, instructing staff that rebates require them:

..to be at all times knowledgeable of all Social Services benefits and pensions, the Means test, the Repatriation pensions and allowance, Social Welfare and worker's compensation, both weekly payments and settlement amounts.

(Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967)

Should they fail to be at 'all times knowledgeable of all social benefits', abuse of the rebate system was likely to flourish; a highly undesirable situation because; 'Rental rebates give the Housing Commission tenant an advantage over those outside the Commission and we are therefore determined that this great privilege should not be misused or abused. Over the past, many instances of cheating have come to my attention, and I suspect that many other cases have happened there tenants are obtaining a rebate to which they are not entitled' (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967).

When I spoke with the retired housing workers about rebates, they, without exception, remember their own experience:

Rebates! What a nightmare. One bloke and I spent the best part of a day trying to work out what to charge this woman. The manual was pages and pages long, filled with descriptions of circumstances, rules and tens of variations to each rule. We just settled on what we though she looked like she could afford.

(Chalkley, 2005)

In the majority of documents examined in this paper, the discourse around rebates echoed the reflections of these ex-housing workers; the scheme was portrayed as unduly burdensome, costly and difficult to manage. The multifaceted and enduring problems with rental rebates appear to be deeply layered in the sediment of the organisation; the literature tells us that rebates are (and have always been) difficult to administer, are easily exploited, require constant surveillance by staff, are poorly understood by both staff and tenants and often result in unintended arrears (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967, Barnett and Burt, 1942, Ministry of Housing, 1989).

The dominant discourse about rebates tells staff to expect this procedure to be difficult and problematic, and it is.

Show me the money: a history of problems with rent

I think it is fair to say that we are all likely to be more sympathetic to an attractive young blond who is in arrears than to an elderly unattractive woman.
(Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967)

Once the rebate is calculated and the weekly rent established the next step for the housing worker is to monitor the payment of rent in their patch. Once again, the early literature shows that the collection of rent has two long standing problems; firstly, the organisation had, for sometime, failed to effectively administer the payment of rent and the recovery of arrears. Second, arrears were treated as 'unrealised income'; they had a direct and very real impact on local budgets. In 'New Houses for Old', Howe describes a history of problems with arrears:

The increase of rental arrears worried the commission. At 30 June 1945 the total amount of arrears was £292.7s; three years later it was £12,568; and by 1954 the total was close to £100,000. The commission could do little to slow the increase (let alone decrease) arrears while it was understaffed.
(Howe, 1988b)

Some years later, the Victorian Auditor General found that little had changed; the size of the arrears balance had continued to grow, and 'of the \$6.1m of debts written-off in 2001-02, \$4.2m (\$1.8 in 2000-01) related to the inability of the Office of Housing to locate former tenants with rental and maintenance debts outstanding – a significant increase over the preceding year'. (Victorian Auditor General, 2004.)

Once again, this list of problems is not new; the collection of rent has never been easy, in the 1930s Pennington's idea of all female housing officers collecting rent under the Octavia Hill model collapsed mainly because a suitable time for the collection of rent could not be found. (Howe, 1988a)

In the 1950s arrears climbed as tenants protested over rent increases, with a number refusing to pay rent. (Eather, 1988) Economic factors such as war, depression and unemployment have long had a deleterious effect on the income of state housing authorities and the more recently, the decline in the manufacturing sector (particularly the automotive industry) resulted in an increase in the number of tenants living on reduced incomes and/or government benefits. (Peel, 2003) Strategies such as; the construction of mobile rent collection vans, locating staff in offices on the estate, payroll rent deduction (as early as 1956) and encouraging staff to collect rent as their first and most important task, all met with limited success. The introduction of direct debit for rent resolved some problems with the 'mechanisms of collection' (Dalton, 1988) but the level of default (that is; tenants having insufficient funds to cover the deduction) created a new set of problems for housing workers.

The housing literature cited in this paper (Australian Army Education Service, 1948, Barnett and Burt, 1942, Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1975, Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958, Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967, Housing Commission Victoria, 1966, Howe, 1988b) provides an enduring narrative of how housing managers have always balanced the pressure to increase income from rent with their responsibility to provide

affordable housing. This literature records 'patchy' attempts at resolving these problems with inadequate and inconsistent income. The literature contains pages of unrealised recommendations, telling of little or no opportunity to charge full-cost recovery rent and impossibly complex and time-consuming processes for the collection of arrears. It would appear that the problems expressed in the narrative some seventy years ago, are as current today as they were then.

4) *Chill it?*

Perhaps there is a fourth element? 'Chill it?'

Supervising anti-social behaviour and managing precarious neighbourhoods.

The final section of this paper is a brief history of how housing authorities have worked to 'manage' tenants: the literature shows that the policies, procedures and practices of housing authorities have been subject to frequent scrutiny; in particular, their role as the supervisors of difficult tenants, disorderly streets and 'gritty commission neighbourhoods' (Chalkley, 2004a). One popular perception is that the Office of Housing and its predecessors, was (and is) responsible for the production of increasingly complex and problematic communities; often referred to in the press as 'ghettos' and 'corridors of bleak public housing' (Shiel, 1998). One of the retired housing workers told me that he was always uncomfortable with the title; '*Commission Ghettos*' and instead used the slightly ambiguous phrase '*deteriorating communities*' to describe the most marginalised public housing areas. (Chalkley, 2004a)

The administration of these 'deteriorating communities' has never been an easy task. Over the years, housing managers and their staff have responded with a number of management techniques; bluntly enforcing compliance to rules and regulations, advising and training female tenants in good housekeeping, modelling appropriate domestic behaviour (Barnett and Burt, 1942), using eviction to control behaviour and most recently, self determination, community development and tenant participation (Office of Housing, 2002a). The behaviour of the 'typical' public housing tenant has long been a vexed issue for successive Victorian Governments, starting with the public scrutiny experienced by the first Housing Commissioners. In the 1930s and 40s, the slum reform movement faced a number of problems when relocating 'slum minded' tenants to new neighbourhoods (Barnett and Burt, 1942), and as a result, early housing staff set about managing tenant behaviour with a raft of rules and regulations:

The state as landlord was paternalistic and intrusive. The original 'Conditions of Tenancy' agreement set out numerous requirements of the tenant in relation to keeping the housing clean and in good repair and twelve matters that the tenant was not permitted to do, ranging from using the house 'for many illegal or immoral purpose' to not hanging pictures 'otherwise than on the picture rails provided.' (Howe, 1988b)

The historical housing literature used in this paper (Australian Army Education Service, 1948, Barnett and Burt, 1942, Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1975, Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958, Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967, Housing Commission Victoria, 1966, Howe, 1988b) includes a number of occasionally conflicting commentaries about the 'appropriate' role and responsibilities for housing authorities: Should they go beyond simply housing people? Is it realistic to expect housing workers to ensure that tenants comply with laws, rules, and regulations? Are housing authorities responsible for tenant education, community development and social guidance? One central question in this literature is; 'Is it possible for one agency to perform two very different tasks; facility

management and social welfare'? Sixty years ago, the Army Education Service thought that the role of housing authorities should be to 'relocate' and then 're-educate':

People who are rehoused must be taught to get the best out of their environment. There are two aspects of living in a new home – taking care of the house itself and getting the best out of the neighbourhood. It isn't enough to put people in a house with plenty of light and air and leave them to make out the best they can. Modern housing policy goes beyond that. It plans a satisfactory social environment for rehoused people.

(Australian Army Education Service, 1948)

Some tens years later, Gaskin and Burkitt were slightly more circumspect in their comments about the role of the commission in the daily lives of tenants '*...there is a close tie between tenant and authority resulting in a firm but flexible control of property preservation, the authority not being to inquisitive into the every day life of tenants.*' (Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958)

The concept of 'firm but fair' management was repeated in the Estate Officers Manual:

Care should of course be exercised to ensure that this friendly feeling is kept on an impersonal basis as any close personal friendship between an estate officer and his tenant could cause him embarrassment if he found it necessary to take action. (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967)

The reason for this 'impersonal friendliness' was simple and pragmatic:

He (the Estate Officer) is in a position to assist them when misfortune strikes by advising them of the facilities available to provide relief. One of his functions is to ensure that tenants are able to obtain maximum enjoyment of their premise by seeing other tenants do not cause annoyance by unsatisfactory behaviour. (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967)

As housing managers found themselves facing an increasing number of properties housing gradually more complex tenants, it seems that they began to develop a discursive framework to express and understand the problems they now faced. Managers and staff in this period worked with little understanding of the changing nature of tenants and little or no training in how to manage sometimes difficult neighbourhoods. With the exception of the 'Estate Officers Training Manual' (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967) locating clearly articulated instructions about 'how to respond to' difficult tenants is impossible; the early Octavia Hill narratives provide a list of standards and accepted social norms, but the literature from this period onwards appears to be an oft-repeated declaration about a pressing need to 'take some action in the very near future' (Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958).

By the 1990s, housing commentators began to express tenancy issues as 'wicked problems', 'deep economic need' and 'a communication problem' (Kent and Hamilton, 1990). One of the retired housing staff told me that he started his working life as an electrician and some thirty years later, with little formal training, he found himself responsible for the management of staff who were in turn, responsible for the management of increasingly difficult tenants:

Crikey, that's a hard one. Look, in all honesty, the hardest part was the fact that we didn't notice – they just changed, we just changed and the organisation had restructured a heap of times in those years. We never got any training in complex tenants; you just dealt with the ratbags and helped

with disasters where you could. I wouldn't want to be a housing officer today – you have to be a social worker and landlord - holding one hand and smacking the other. (Interview with former Housing Worker.)
(Chalkley, 2004a)

This pragmatic and candid answer provides the reader with an insight into how difficult it was/is for the staff employed by State Government housing authorities to identify and understand the changing nature of tenants (and their complex and multiple needs). In order to be considered eligible for public housing, tenants have always been marginalised, public tenants have always been poor, tenants have always presented with some form of complex need and as these needs have changed, so has the organisation and those who work in it. (Office of Housing, 2004)

For the Office of Housing, responding to the needs of tenants is difficult for two reasons; firstly, the diversity and ever-changing nature of these needs makes it almost impossible to formulate an organisation-wide response that works in all locations, for all tenants. Secondly, the organisation itself is in a permanent state of change; recruitment of suitable/skilled new staff is problematic, staff frequently move on, upwards and away, policies are reviewed and revised (sometimes without evaluation), data is quickly redundant and individual staff often make 'on the run' interpretations of procedure that is at times 'not in keeping with policy'. The literature, press and local office narratives tell housing staff that the 'Chilling' public housing tenants is difficult, and it is.

Built, Filled, Billed and Chilled: To Conclude.

This historical account provides an insight into how the long-established problems with '*building, filling and billing*' have had an enduring impact on the roles and responsibilities of current housing workers. The documents cited in this paper describe a public housing discourse saturated with the language of building and construction, reducing costs through pre-fabrication and how to best utilise limited land in slum areas. (Australian Army Education Service, 1948, Barnett and Burt, 1942, Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1975, Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958, Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967, Housing Commission Victoria, 1966, Howe, 1988b)

More recently, the discourse focuses on strategies to reduce waiting lists/times, understand the changing needs of tenants and develop functional linkages between intergovernmental departments as a response to these needs. (Office of Housing, 2004) Successive housing authorities have written about the problems with developing a simple, equitable and effective rebate system, they have described permanently high rent arrears, and expressed their frustrated attempts to maintain properties that require substantial, costly repairs. These documents provide an interesting insight into how the understandings and perceptions of past housing managers are subject to ongoing (re)interpretation and play an important role in the structuring of the organisation.

The literature in this paper describes how, over time, housing staff have evolved into managers of 'welfare' housing; offering accommodation as component of the social welfare system, providing shelter to the most needy and marginalised members of society. It would appear that they have been, for sometime, managers of 'housing of last resort'.

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