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Creating home: young people's responses to physical design and material elements of youth housing models

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ABSTRACT

Despite the continued growth in the number of young people experiencing homelessness, there continues to be debate about the most appropriate way to respond to this issue. One response has been the provision of Youth Housing Models (YHMs) that provide short term (1–2 years) housing for young people on the pre-condition that the young person is willing or actively engaged in education and employment. These models can be purpose built, or retrofits of existing buildings, and while 'home is more than a building' this article argues that there are physical components of housing that can improve or diminish a young person's experience of citizenship and home. These include capacity to personalise their space, the ability to connect with others while still retaining individual space, and the provision of a safe environment. Drawing on interviews with 31 young people housed across five youth housing models in South Australia, this article demonstrates the specific ways that physical and material components assisted or challenged a sense of home for the young person. The findings highlight the need for youth housing policies and programs to prioritise belonging, connection, and safety to improve young people's well-being and long-term housing outcomes.

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Introduction

There continues to be a growth in the number of young people experiencing homelessness in Australia (Flatau *et al.*, 2022; Rowley *et al.*, 2023), and beyond (Hoolachan, 2022; Mayock & Parker, 2020). Young people's experiences of homelessness are markedly different to other groups, and importantly, the younger a person is when they first experience homelessness the more likely that they will experience ongoing housing instability throughout their life (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2013; Johnstone *et al.*, 2016).

These factors mean that the response to young people who experience homelessness must differ from that of other groups. Common responses to young people

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are Transitional Housing Programs, Independent Living Programs, and Foyers (Semborski *et al.*, 2021). Considered a ‘stepping stone’ to independence, these models focus on building capacities and providing support for a defined time frame (Semborski *et al.*, 2021). The Foyer model has emerged as a particularly popular responses. Originating in nineteenth Century France and later adopted in the late 1980s in the UK, Foyers have adapted to meet the needs of the political and geographical landscape (Lovatt *et al.*, 2006). In Australia, foyer type models have been operating since the early 2010s, while these models vary in their implementation and funding design, their commonality is their dual role to accommodate young people with expectations of participation in education and employment (Flatau *et al.*, 2017; Steen & MacKenzie, 2017).

The role of foyers (and similar models) has been considered ‘an important component of the future support system for vulnerable youth’ (Hand & Mackenzie, 2023). And while Foyers may be considered “an” answer, rather than “the” answer’ to addressing youth homelessness (Waters & Mukherjee, 2021), it is important to understand the strengths and limitations of these models, and their capacity to create home (Hand & Mackenzie, 2023). Furthermore, due to the different ways in which Australia has implemented these housing models to avoid confusion with the official Foyer model, this article refers to these services as Youth Housing Models or YHMs (Gaetz & Scott, 2012).

While this article focuses on data collected in 2011-12, the challenges facing young people to access affordable housing continue to remain relevant. Australia, as with other neo-liberal Western countries, continues to see a decline in public housing (Morris, 2023), reduced affordable housing (Pawson, 2021) and an over-stretched Specialist Homelessness Service sector (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2020). Young people in particular are bearing the brunt of these challenges as they navigate higher cost of living (Batterham *et al.*, 2022), a limited social security safety net (Davidson *et al.*, 2022), and increased barriers to secure and sustainable work (Chesters, 2020). Although there have been evaluations of YHMs (see Coddou *et al.*, 2019; Quilgars *et al.*, 2005), there continues to be debate both in Australia and Internationally about how we should respond to the issue of youth homelessness and the efficacy of YHMs to meet this need (Mayock & Parker, 2020; Semborski *et al.*, 2021; Stewart, 2019).

This article provides important insight into young people’s experiences of YHMs, with a particular focus on how the physical structure of the building creates home. Based on interviews with 31 young people, across five YHMs in Adelaide, South Australia this article makes three key arguments. First, the capacity for material items to create a sense of belonging. Second, the ability for YHM design to create or diminish a young person’s sense of connection with other tenants, workers, and the local community. Third, the capacity for YHMs to provide a safe environment and how they balance security with surveillance. This article provides a novel contribution by focusing on the material and spatial dimensions of home and demonstrating how these physical characteristics mediate belonging, connection and safety. In establishing the importance of home, this article assists in answering the question of whether models such as YHMs can create home, possible ways that they could improve experiences of home and who the model might best fit.

Why young people experience homelessness

Young people are particularly susceptible to homelessness for structural and individual reasons. Structurally, the young person (and their family) may be impacted by poverty (through unemployment, low paying wages, and/or a welfare safety net that does not match current cost of living) (Cuervo & Chesters, 2019; Sharam & Hulse, 2014), a lack of affordable housing (Morris, 2023), contact with the child protection system (Mendes & McCurdy, 2020), and or family breakdown (either normative or due to complex trauma). Here complex trauma is defined as ‘...a period of exposure to multiple trauma events, such as in the contexts of childhood sexual and physical abuse and neglect, torture and combat, and to the resulting intensified forms of psychological, physiological and developmental suffering likely to emerge for survivors.’ (Robinson, 2018, p. 164).

On an individual level, young people by definition are at a point where they are transitioning physically, emotionally, psychologically and legally (Wyn, 2014). More specifically, a young person’s individual pathway into homelessness can be influenced by an intersection of Indigeneity (Memmott & Nash, 2014), gender and sexual identity (Hail-Jares *et al.*, 2023; Hail-Jares *et al.*, 2021), cultural and linguistical background (Ziersch *et al.*, 2023), as well as experiences of mental ill health and/or substance misuse (Hallam *et al.*, 2022).

Ultimately, however, an overemphasis on either the individual or the structural predictors of homelessness may distract from the fact it is the intersection of these factors that increases the chances of an individual experiencing homelessness (O’Flaherty, 2004). Specifically, it is when individual characteristics intersect with socioeconomic dimensions and housing and labour market conditions that these groups are placed at higher risk of experiencing homelessness (Johnson *et al.*, 2019). Reflecting findings that ultimately what is needed is ‘policy action to prevent homelessness, given its predictable but far from inevitable nature’ (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 113).

Regardless of the factors that lead to homeless, individuals often encounter further challenges once they become homeless, including what Farrugia (2011) refers to as the ‘symbolic burden of homelessness’. This ‘burden’ combined with a young person’s experiences while homelessness (Hail-Jares *et al.*, 2021) and their access (or lack thereof) to homelessness services (Mayock & Parker, 2020), may result in increased difficulty in ‘getting out’ of homelessness (Johnson *et al.*, 2008; Mallett *et al.*, 2009).

For young people in particular, the ‘pathway’ into homelessness, is rarely linear, with multiple intervention points requiring varying responses (Elkins *et al.*, 2024; Johnson & Chamberlain, 2014). What is known is that for a young person who does experience homelessness, they are more likely to go on to be marginally housed than other population groups, including experiencing overcrowding, couch surfing, residing in boarding houses and supported accommodation, and ultimately an increased instability, or ‘cycling’, between housing types (Elkins *et al.*, 2024; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2013; Scutella & Wooden, 2014).

Current housing responses for young people who experience homelessness

Since youth homelessness was first recognised as an issue in Australia in the late 1980s there have been a variety of public policy responses (Coleman & Fopp, 2014).

The provision of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) has been one of the primary responses. Designed primarily to provide a crisis response, SHS prioritises services to those most in need, reflecting social policy that is focused on addressing homelessness without reference to early intervention or exit points (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2020).

The crisis driven nature of SHS often exposes young people to instability, a lack of security, and close living arrangements with other young people presenting with increasingly complex issues related to their pathways into homelessness and experiences while homeless (Johnstone *et al.*, 2016). This, combined with a lack of timely, affordable, and sustainable exit points, meant some young people choose to disengage from services ‘...where they felt consigned or dispatched to a life of homelessness’ (Mayock & Parker, 2020, p. 475), even if this disengagement resulted in insecure, unstable and short-term housing options.

Within this context, there continues to be a call for a housing response that fills the gap between crisis services and a young person being at a point of stable financial independence. While recent public policy has embraced Housing First models, that provide long term housing to adults experiencing chronic homelessness with no preconditions (Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000), young people have generally been assumed to require more intensive support to build their independent living skills, resulting in an increasing emphasis on young people who are considered housing ready (Quilgars & Pleace, 1999; Stewart, 2019).

Housing readiness reflects a ‘staircase’ model where individuals who demonstrate the capabilities for independent living are granted priority access to housing, while those who do not are relegated back to emergency or crisis housing (Clarke *et al.*, 2020, p. 964). This article contributes to this literature by exploring this dynamic through the lens of home, citizenship and materiality.

Home, citizenship and materiality

Home is an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Meers, 2023) and has been studied across multiple disciplines from a variety of perspectives. Examples of how we understand home include a delineation between the structural house and the concept of home (Robinson, 2011); home as a haven (Dovey, 1985), home as a psychological and emotional feeling (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998); home as relational (Mallett, 2004); and home as a place of routines and rituals (Saile, 1985).

Partly, the diversity of opinion on home reflects the dynamic nature of home – something that is not static – but felt differently across members of the same household and which varies across the course of a person’s life. As highlighted by Clapham (2011, p. 363) ‘Home is both a discourse and a physical object within which embodied activities are performed’. Therefore, within this context, this article adopts a phenomenological approach to home, recognising that home is felt, created, and experienced (Natalier & Johnson, 2015).

In the case of young people who have faced homelessness they have often experienced a loss of home that had implications for their future housing options, economic participation, and the formation of their identity (Watson & Cuervo,

2017). For these young people rather than home as being equated with positive emotions and experiences it may instead be a site of trauma and oppression where the individual may feel 'homeless at home' (Wardhaugh, 1999, p. 93). Upon entering the homelessness service system, the young person may face a further loss of ontological security or the capacity to build a space of one's own in which to orient '... the self psychologically, spiritually, and temporally in the world' (Robinson, 2011, p. 6). As such, young people in transitional housing may at best be able to engage in 'place-making' when the ability to create home is out of reach. Place-making practices are defined as having 'the goal of creating a safer, more pleasant living space which helped the young people to feel in control and cope with their difficult situations' (Hoolachan, 2022, p. 214).

Within this context, this article focuses specifically on the material aspects of how home is 'felt, created, and experienced' for young people within YHMs. While acknowledging that 'home is more than a building' (Robinson, 2011) and that material objects can be 'viewed more as emblematic of broadly exemplified and 'objective' social values and mores' (Jacobs & Malpas, 2013, p. 282), this article argues that the physicality of a house - its ability to provide shelter and separation from the broader world - forms a fundamental foundation for what home can be (Natalier & Johnson, 2015; Parsell, 2012). As such, the analysis incorporates the dynamic relationship between the physical structure and an individual's sense of control and belonging (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020, p. 597). By examining young people's perceptions of the physical design and material elements of YHMs through the lens of home, this article offers valuable insights for future funding decisions. Recognising that some YHMs are retrofitted while others are newly built, and that material support varies, understanding these building and material dimensions provides evidence on what supports young people in experiencing a sense of home within these models.

Methodology

The data informing this article come from a Doctoral project linkage partnership funded by the Australian Research Council and Service to Youth Council Inc (SYC) and was granted institutional ethical approval University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee (Project No: H-156-2011). The study offers a comparative analysis of YHMs across four different socio-economic locations in Adelaide, South Australia between late 2011 and 2012. Each of the services provided supported housing with either on-site or off-site support for young people aged 16 to 25 years old with rent set at a proportion of their income. Most commonly units were one bedroom or bed-sits, with a small amount of double units for couples or share houses. Funding for the models predominantly relied on public/private partnership between South Australian or local government and an NGO. The locations of the housing varied from inner city to outer suburbs of metropolitan Adelaide (see [Figure 1](#)).

By placing the young person at the centre of the analysis, this research focused on the dimensions and circumstances of those young people residing in the YHMs, their own experiences across different biographies and demographic backgrounds

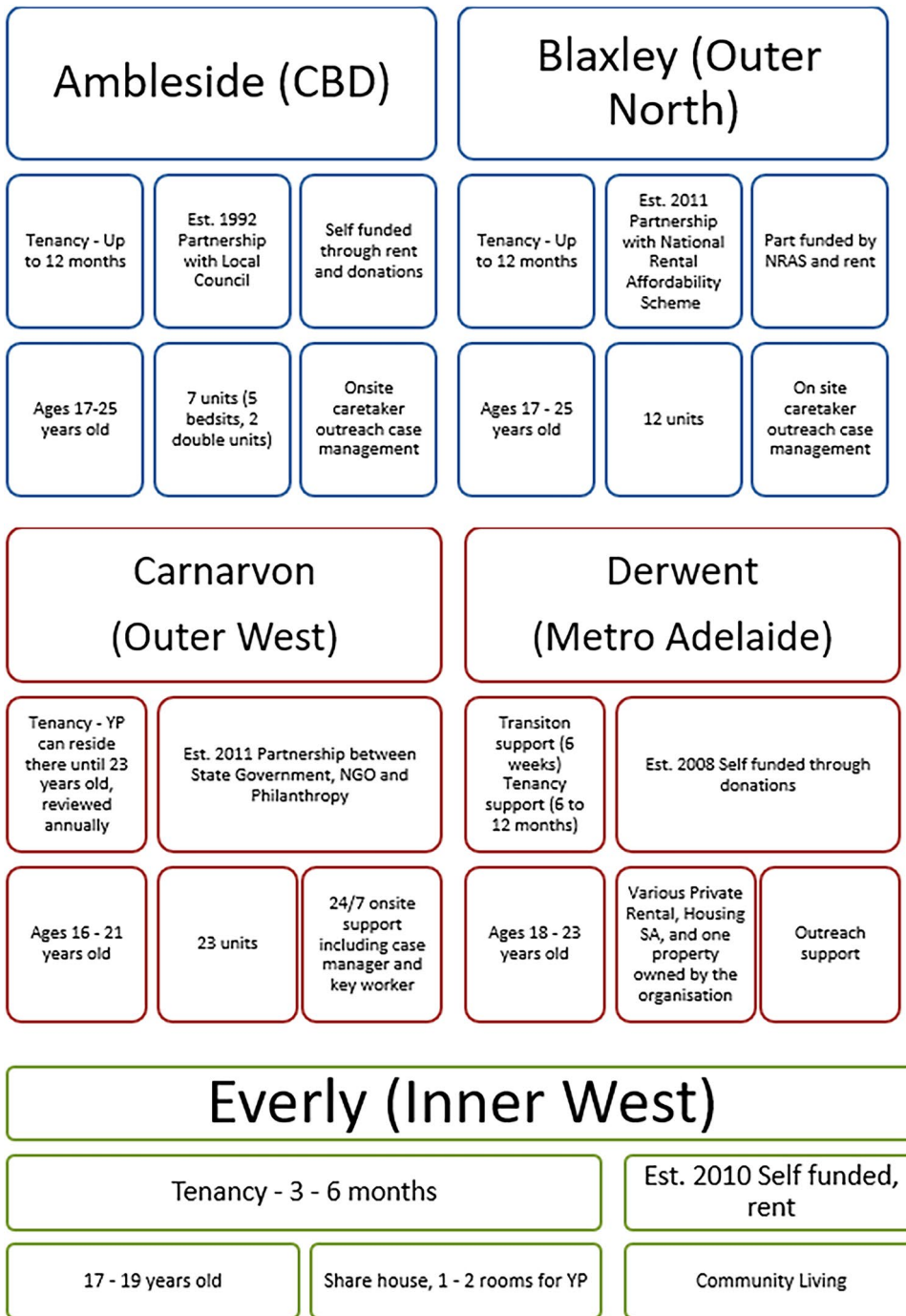


Figure 1. YHM Types.

(Mallett *et al.*, 2009). Participants were invited to complete a short demographic survey, followed by a semi-structured interview exploring the young person's biographies; experiences and expectations of the YHM; and of their future aspirations.

Recruitment and sample

Interviews and focus groups were undertaken with young people residing in the YHMs. In total, 36 individual interviews and one focus group took place with 31 young people residing in the YHMs. The ages of young people interviewed ranged from 16 to 22 years old and 13 identified as male and 18 identified as female. The average length of tenancy for the participants at the time of their initial interview was five months. All participants received a gift voucher in recognition of their time. Throughout this article all participants and agencies are deidentified using pseudonyms.

This article focuses specifically on the young person's perceptions of the housing model itself and how it facilitated experiences of home. Using a grounded approach to data analysis (see Clarke *et al.*, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), data was transcribed and analysed using NVIVO software with each interview transcript closely read to identify themes.

This study focused on young people in South Australia living in Youth Housing Models (YHMs), providing in-depth insights into their experiences of home. While the interviews provided rich, detailed narratives, the sample may not capture the full diversity of experiences among young people accessing models similar to YHMs. Given the interpretive nature of qualitative research, complete neutrality is unattainable, and while reflexive practices were employed to mitigate this, it is important to acknowledge, as a white female researcher, limitations of understanding how home is constructed beyond western frameworks (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020; Cripps & Habibis, 2019). Despite these limitations, this study provides critical insights into how young people experience 'home' within YHMs. Future research could prioritise the expertise and voices of First Nations and/or CALD researchers and participants, as well as explore the longitudinal experiences of young people once they leave the YHM.

Results

Unlike adults, young people will rarely experience one significant event (such as financial crisis, domestic violence) that will result in them experiencing homelessness. Instead, there will often be multiple points in which they will transition in and out of the family home before moving into long term homelessness (Elkins *et al.*, 2024; Johnson & Chamberlain, 2014). Through the interview process, three distinct cohorts of young people were identified. Those that had come into the YHM *via* Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) ($n=17$); young people who had flown 'under the radar' of homeless services ($n=7$); and those who had recently arrived in Australia as refugees or humanitarian entrants ($n=8$).

The targeting of 'housing ready' young people was reflected in the young people who had come from SHS, with the majority ($n=14$) having only accessed these services while being assessed for eligibility for the YHM. A smaller group ($n=5$) had accessed SHS for over a year prior to moving into the YHM.

An additional group of young people ($n=7$) had no or limited contact with homelessness services prior to moving into the YHM. These young people who flew

‘under the radar’ reflected the high rates of young people who experience ‘hidden homelessness’ - a catch all term that can include ‘unsafe sleeping’ (Robinson, 2011), couch surfing (McLoughlin, 2013), being avoidant of formal services, or service fatigue (Mayock & Parker, 2020).

Although people of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) backgrounds only make up a minority of homelessness service users in Australia, existing literature highlights the particular challenges these groups face. These challenges predominantly relate to intergenerational clashes as young people take on Australian morals and values which may conflict with those of their country of origin (Couch, 2017; Ziersch *et al.*, 2023). However, there was also an added challenge for the young people interviewed as part of this study with eight of the nine young people identifying as from a CaLD background also identifying as humanitarian refugees. Furthermore, how these young people sought asylum also impacted on their experience of home, with some provided a humanitarian allocation ($n=4$), by themselves by boat ($n=2$), or by seeking asylum while they were studying in Australia ($n=2$) (Ziersch *et al.*, 2023). These variances had a bearing on the young person’s experiences prior to becoming homeless, their links to community support, and on what services they were able to access.

However, despite this diversity, whichever way the young person arrived at the YHM they had all experienced some form of trauma that both preceded and continued through their experience of homelessness (Robinson, 2011). Therefore, improving and providing opportunities to create a space where individuals could feel a sense of belonging, community and security were key role to assisting the young person to create home.

Materials provided by YHMs

Bruce: Yeah it was, at first it was a bit, I was a bit shaky about it, you know, just like it’s a new place it’s a nice house and all but it’s really empty, you know and I had nothing, I just had a bag of clothes and a 50 inch plasma

A key element to creating home, was the young person’s ability to have choice and control about the material elements of their home, reflecting the way an individual’s ability to personalise their surroundings can increase their greater experience of security in their environment (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Milligan *et al.*, 2024). However, as in the case of Bruce, by the time a young person was referred to a YHM they often had limited possessions of their own either because they may not have accumulated major possessions in the first place, or because any possessions that they did have were diminished as they moved from place to place (Robinson, 2011).

Both having possessions and having a safe place to keep these possessions play an important role in creating ontological security, increasing the participant’s sense of stability, developing and promoting an individual identity, and increasing their capacity to engage in the broader world (Campo *et al.*, 2020; Robinson, 2011). Each YHM, had a different approach to what additional material items were provided beyond the physical structure, ranging from a fully furnished unit with bed, kitchen items, and TV to simply a fridge and some basic crockery.

In its inception, Blaxley, provided all tenants with a fully furnished home. The tenants were then able to own the furniture permanently if they met their lease agreement and the furniture was kept in reasonable condition for the first three months. The decision to provide or not to provide material items across different YHMs was limited by the funding available. For older models that did not have furnishings built into their funding model, the YHMs supported the young person to access any other financial assistance they are entitled to so that they will have sufficient items needed to create a home.

There could often be a clash in the timelines of when a young person was approved to move into the YHM and navigating the eligibility criteria and time constraints of funding for material items. In the case of Danny (22), even though material assistance applications began well before he was to move into Ambleside, Danny spent the first part of his tenancy sleeping on the floor with a fridge as his only furniture:

Danny: ...They declined – no not declined it [funding application]. There was just some things that needed to be fixed up because there was a – the quote that I got for the furniture was a bit ... Out of date...Yeah and they wanted a new one. So I had to go through that and then take another three weeks for them to read that one.

The process was also hampered for another Ambleside tenant Amy (aged 18) due to a need to confirm her citizenship and therefore eligibility for the assistance.

Amy: It took me a while. Um oh god I only got furniture like – and even then I didn't get a lot ... because I had to apply for a grant to get it, and it took ages to come through. Then when I did get the actual like paperwork for it, it was – we weren't sure because I'm not a citizen, I'm a permanent resident. So we weren't sure if I could actually do it, so I had to get another one, but that one went through in two weeks. So that was good.

The difficulty in furnishing their own spaces reflects the very low incomes available to the young person (Davidson *et al.*, 2022). Even when paying a YHM subsidised rent, those reliant solely on youth allowance would have very little money to put away for larger expenditures such as bond and furniture.

The young person was more likely to feel at home in cases where YHMs were able to provide semi to fully furnished units. When asked how he felt when he first saw his unit, Bruce (aged 19) described it this way: 'Rich. Made me feel on top of the world really. I felt like somebody had just given me a million dollars and there it is and yeah it was, it was good, it was awesome.'

However, it was the ability to have a hand in creating their own space that led to the young person feeling as though they belonged (Stewart, 2019). After years of couch surfing and living in share houses, being able to make a place her own was especially important for Blaxley resident Ally (aged 21):

Ally: When I first saw it [the unit] I freaked out. I think the first impression I had when I walked in the door, the first thing I noticed was there were hooks on the wall. I know how stupid that sounds, but I never – I've been out of home since I was 15 years old so whenever I see something awesome it's like yes, I can put posters up on my walls. It's like this is my house.

Similarly, Carnarvon resident Alisha (aged 17), identified that she did not really feel like the fully furnished unit was her home until she had lived there for five months and was able to get her unit the way she liked it. Explaining, 'Only in the last month it's started so really five months it took me to get everything the way I want it, looking nice; now it feels like home.' These comments reflect previous studies on the importance of being able to personalise space and exert control over their environment to increase feelings of security (Hoolachan, 2022; Milligan *et al.*, 2024).

The young people's highlighting of the importance of soft furnishings does not reduce the importance of providing semi to fully furnished units. While having unfamiliar furniture may initially reduce the young person's sense of home, it does at least provide a basis from which they can build. However, the capacity to create home is still limited by the broader surroundings including feeling of safety and connection with others living in the same space. As such, although elements like hooks and physical possessions assist the young person to feel at home, the young people interviewed still frequently spoke of needing time to adjust to their surroundings.

Managing isolation and community

The initial excitement and relief participants felt upon moving into the YHM was quickly overshadowed by the realities of living independently for the first time. Even for those who have been 'looking after themselves' for years, the sudden isolation that can come with having one's own space was jarring. For young people home is often perceived as relational, with these relationships changing and being renegotiated as the young person becomes more independent (Campo *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, there was the potential for past trauma to resurface during periods of stability (Johnson *et al.*, 2008; Robinson, 2011), with their newfound 'freedom' being offset by a deep sense of loss as they navigate independence without familial supports offered to other young people (McLoughlin, 2013). It can also lead to increased loneliness as the young person navigates stigma from the broader community (Bower *et al.*, 2018). and balances building meaningful relationships with 'acute awareness of relational risks' (Moensted & Day, 2025).

As Carrie (aged 18) explains below, despite moving out of her family home when she was 13, and staying under the radar of support services, living alone was initially confronting as she got used to new routines and needed to manage by herself:

Carrie: It's kind of weird living by myself. I've never just been totally on my own before, so it's hard. I talk to myself a lot, not realizing, going a bit crazy. It's good. It's hard to get into the routine of having your own place. You have to clean and you have to do this and that. Pay bills and that kind of thing. That's hard, but I really like it.

The YHMs sought to address the challenges faced by the young people through physical designs that promoted access to support, connection with other young people, and/or links to the broader community (Bower *et al.*, 2018).

Easily accessible support workers provided a necessary buffer for young people living along for the first time, as well as an important conduit to help the young person problem solve and communicate issues (Parsell, 2016). The young people valued YHMs that were either staffed 24/7 or had an on-site caretaker, for example, one Ambleside tenant Melody (aged 19) appreciated that the caretaker would informally touch base to check that she is doing okay.

Melody: Oh, that's just, like I'll see her out in the courtyard and it'll just be like, 'How's your weekend been, how's your week been?' Sort of just catch up. And she'll be like 'I haven't seen you in a while', and I'll be 'Yeah, I spent the week at dads.' Just touching base really, she'll come up sometimes, if she hasn't really seen me in ages, just to go 'Hey, I haven't seen you in a while, is everything ok?' But yeah, she's good.

In this way, the caretaker/concierge was less about surveillance and more a 'familiar face' that tenants could actively engage with to meet their own needs and provide a greater sense of safety and belonging (Parsell, 2016; Parsell & Watts, 2017). In the case of Carnarvon resident, Curtis (aged 22) who had previously experienced extensive support from SHS, most valued the ability to talk things through with on-site workers, which eased his isolation.

Curtis: Just having someone that you can always come and talk to like that is so helpful with mental health. You wouldn't think just talking about it helps that much but it really does. If you want outreach support in mental health they're onto it straight away, anything like that. But for me, it's just being able to come down there and talk to someone.

What was also valued was the chance to connect with other young people. One element regularly identified to be beneficial by residents was the provision of a common room, reflecting evidence of the benefits of communal areas that provide residents with the ability to catch up with other young people on a flexible basis (Gaetz & Scott, 2012). As Samantha (aged 17) explains:

Samantha: I like the communal lounge. I like that everyone can go and chill in there and they've got a big TV and I'm able to hang out. Yes, that's probably the best bit.

Amy (aged 18), who was residing in Ambleside, also identified it as a place that she could connect with others when she felt like it.

Amy: Yeah, like if you want to you just kind of go see someone, or, yeah, we do sometimes use the communal room quite a bit, just watching TV and just go hang out there but yeah ...just go see them...

An important element to young people enjoying the space was to use these communal areas for both structured and unstructured activities in an organic, non-confronting way. The structured time provided a prompt for young people to get to know each other in a safe environment. Meanwhile casual use in the communal spaces provided the flexibility to create more organic relationships between young people.

However, in cases where the young people were forced to use communal areas it had the contradictory effect of reducing the young person's sense of home. One YHM attempted to promote community by only providing stove tops and microwaves

in units and requiring tenants to use the ovens in the communal kitchen. However, this was not utilised by many of the young people interviewed, as Holly and Travis explain:

Holly: The one thing, I don't know, the kitchen in the middle, I don't know, that's the one thing because there's only one set oven and if you don't get along with other people, I don't know, it's probably not the best thing to have, but I don't think you can really change that.

Travis: I don't really cook anything that requires an oven, because it's usually like the oven, people don't take care of that and it gets burned black on the bottom and trashed. So I don't really want to go in there and have to clean up somebody else's mess. I mean, do what I have to do and clean up my mess, so yeah, I'll just stick to using the stove...

Perceptions like those of Holly and Travis illustrate the difference in perceptions of how space would be used between workers and the people using the service (Pable *et al.*, 2022). While services may assume that the kitchen is the heart of the home (Dorrer *et al.*, 2010), communal kitchens in YHMs may inadvertently increase a young person's experiences of food insecurity (Brothers *et al.*, 2020). Instead of community being enhanced it was eroded, with the young person managing this discomfort by choosing to further isolate themselves and reduce their use of the common space (Parsell & Watts, 2017).

There were also differences in perception of the importance of community between the young people themselves. Those who arrived in Australia as humanitarian refugees were more likely to appreciate the communal living offered by YHMs. For both Paul (aged 19) and Beth (aged 20), the close physical proximity to others was a crucial part of why they valued living at Carnarvon, finding it improved their mental health and wellbeing. Paul, who was struggling with being separated from his family, felt that if he had to live on his own, he would have been too isolated:

Paul: If I live with myself in a house, just me and no one else, I would come home from work and not talk to anyone else. It would just make me – it's hard for me. You know what I mean?

Similar to Paul, Beth was concerned about feeling lonely and not having any one to check on her and make sure that she is okay.

Beth: I'd feel lonely because here all my neighbours if they haven't seen me for two days, they'll be knocking on my door. If I live by myself there will be nobody there for me. Now I'm used to this.

Part of the explanation that young people from a CaLD background were more likely to appreciate the benefits of living close to others, is the higher rate of social isolation (Ziersch *et al.*, 2023), language barriers and discrimination (Couch, 2017), and the importance placed on connection with family and community (Fozdar & Hartley, 2014).

Despite the perceived benefits, living with so many other people in close proximity had its challenges, particularly in YHMs that had a large number of other young people residing in close proximity. Carnarvon was the YHM with the highest

capacity (an ability to house up to 23 young people), and as tenant Holly (aged 17) explained: ‘...but it’s like a love hate relationship with everyone in here. One minute someone loves that person and the next minute they hate them.’

Even in YHMs with lower numbers of young people, the temporary nature of the housing resulted in a constant flux in relationships as young people moved in and out of the housing. These transitions could result in a loss of trust and norms of reciprocity, potentially prompting the young person to overemphasize their self-reliance and independence (Barker, 2012). Some young people managed the uncertainty that changing tenancies brought by actively avoiding other tenants, stating that they were ‘not all here to make friends’ (Olly). This self-imposed isolation also reinforced the idea that the YHM is simply a temporary stop before moving on to something else, further reducing the capacity to create a sense of home (Hoolachan, 2022).

The continuous flow of people moving in and out of YHMs also impacted the young person’s capacity to feel safe and achieve ontological security, something built through routines and rituals, relationships, and sense of wellbeing and trust in ones environment (Giddens, 1984). In this way, the experience of safety is not just the absence of danger but also access to an environment that is friendly and allows a person to be free from judgment (Hoolachan, 2022; Mallett, 2004). Each YHM had varying methods of managing the safety and security for young people once they were inside the YHM.

Safety within the YHM

Even in high-density properties, the young people had their own unit and private space to retreat (Saunders & Williams, 1988). It was in this space, that the young person was most likely to experience security (Dovey, 1985) something considered ‘fundamental to living well’, after extensive periods of housing insecurity (Moensted & Day, 2025, p. 4). The YHMs safety measures included the way the built environment was structured, how spaces were made accessible or inaccessible for certain groups, on-site support, and surveillance. The way safety measures were implemented was often dependent on whether the building was retrofitted or purpose built. In either instance these measures had varying success as they attempted to balance creating a safe and secure environment while not overly restricting the young person.

Examples of security in newer YHMs such as Blaxley and Carnarvon were purpose-built pods or spaces that restricted access to a small group of units. The young person was able to access their own pod and within each of these pods was a group of four individual self-contained units. Another model utilised swipe card access for both tenants and staff, with some areas restricted to specific groups. For example, there was a female only area and a separate cluster of three units where those considered more vulnerable could be housed.

The security measures related not only to the young person’s safety within the YHM but also in assisting the young person to feel safe within the broader community. To address concerns about tenants’ safety within the community, security was built into the physical structure of the YHMs. In the case of two YHMs, both came with large, locked gates that led to an internal courtyard only accessible by tenants and staff.

Along with the main gates, the YHM had security cameras at the entrance and an unscalable wall, leading Melody (aged 18) to comment that her first impression of the YHM was it 'felt like a prison'. However, Melody later acknowledged the sense of safety that the physical structure provided:

Melody: I'm happy that I've got the fences up. But, if I didn't have the fences up, I'd be a lot more on edge, a lot more uncomfortable. And I wouldn't be sleeping as well. Just, some nights we just have people out in the street... I'm lucky, like I'm comfortable, if I didn't have the cameras or the gate out there I'd be like - 'ahhh, save me!'

Overall, the responses to security in the YHMs were positive, the one area of frustration being where security measures made it more difficult for the young person to keep in contact with their outside connections. Those YHMs that had external security also required friends to be 'buzzed' in at the front gate either by the young person or *via* staff authorisation. It was at these points Alisha (aged 17), who had lived out of home for several years, found some of the restrictions conflicted with her previous freedom.

Alisha: Honestly, there's only one thing I would change about it and it's the telecom thing downstairs, you know? Honestly, when we need telecoms, so you can buzz and say this person's at the door, la-de-dah-de-dah and you can go to your room...

Similarly, Deborah (aged 22) found the inability to buzz people in, and that friends had to park their cars in the street, limited her ability to connect with those outside of the YHM.

Deborah: My friends can't even come over because they don't want to park - because you don't have a buzzer, so they're not leaving their cars out the front, 'cause they'll either get smashed or broken into or the Council will give them a fine...So, I don't know, to me that's isolation. So sometimes I feel like I'm in a prison cell. Because we have all these rules to go by and stuff like that. So...

Alisha and Deborah's comments may also reflect their Aboriginal identity and the need for home to be considered within the broader context of community and cultural connection (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017; Krakouer *et al.*, 2018; Memmott & Nash, 2014). Strong cultural norms and communal understandings may mean home is multi-dimensional and goes beyond a single structure with greater fluidity in who resides in a home (Cripps & Habibis, 2019). These factors were often not adequately addressed in the housing, with structural and security measures creating less capacity for the Aboriginal young people interviewed to remain connected and engaged with friends and family outside of the YHM.

Security cameras were also used in the front entrances and for one housing model security cameras operated in most communal spaces. For some participants this extra level of security assisted in enforcing clear expectations within the YHMs, reflecting that in some cases surveillance can 'promote good neighbourly behaviour' (Parsell, 2016, p. 3195). Holly (aged 17), who had previously experienced domestic violence, felt that the security cameras were essential to the successful running of the YHM she resided in:

Holly: No, I reckon the security cameras are probably the best thing to be in here, otherwise this whole place would turn into shit. The people coming into it make it, I don't know, a bit unstable to start with, but not having any real set boundaries like that and security, I think it would all just turn to trash.

Carrie (aged 18), who resided in Blaxley, also found it comforting that the caretaker could 'look at the cameras' whenever Carrie was concerned:

Carrie: ...Only the four people that live in this pod can get in here, not the other people. So yeah, that's good. Yeah, just knowing that [caretaker's] there as well is always good, because she's always awake because she studies. So even at 3:00 in the morning, if you hear something, you can text her. She will go and look at the cameras for you or something. So yeah, that's good.

The importance of providing higher levels of security were also a reflection of a young person's concerns about living alone for the first time (Parsell, 2016). On one hand, a major element of ontological security and a sense of home requires the ability to exist without 'public scrutiny and surveillance' (Mallett, 2004, p. 71). However, in some cases surveillance can provide greater autonomy and choice that would not be available otherwise (Parsell, 2016). By having security cameras in common areas the YHMs blurred the lines of public and private space. Simon (aged 17) felt the cameras led to him always being watched:

Simon: ...there's cameras everywhere and they threaten you like that they're going to look at them. Like remember how we were sitting down and they said that they were going to check them? That was kind of creepy because that's – we'd been walking around doing god knows what and they're just going to see all of that without asking us first.

As Simon's comment reflects, there are significant challenges in creating home while also complying with rules and surveillance (Hoolachan, 2022). Simon's concerns however, were in the minority, with the majority of the young people who were living independently for the first time, taking comfort in the additional security.

The issue of surveillance was not limited to internal measures but also extended to how the YHM was perceived by the local community. Regardless of its location, one of the biggest challenges residents faced was managing potential stigma from those around them. In all western societies those that are considered socially unwanted, undesirable and distasteful end up experiencing stigma (Bower *et al.*, 2018; Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016; Goffman, 1963). As an already stigmatised group (Lister, 1998), young people face additional challenges when they also experience homelessness (Farrugia, 2011). Importantly the stigma associated with homelessness did not end for the young person once they were housed within the YHM.

By identifying themselves with services designed to support young people who experienced homelessness the residents won the ire of many members of the local community. Some services attempted to manage the stigma by making the YHMs 'invisible', while others had clear signage and actively sought to reduce a sense of "us" from the rest of the public "them" (Pable *et al.*, 2022, p. 140) by engaging through local community meet and greets and creating open communication lines. However, even with these strategies there was still a perception by the young people that the community had particular views of them and their value within the community.

Carnarvon was a signed YHM, that sought to create positive connections with the community, including working with the young people to unpack how they would like to be perceived by the rest of the community. However, participants still had mixed experiences, for example, when Lee (aged 17) got a job at one of the local stores, he chose not tell his employer where he lived because of concerns about the reputation the YHM had in the community, describing:

Lee:...*From what I'm told, it's mixed opinions. I've heard customers at [workplace] just say that it's a place that just helps young homeless people. Then others just say it's a bunch of - feral young kids live.*

Even for those YHMs that remained unsigned, the community quickly became aware of its purpose and the tenant group, diminishing young people's opportunity to escape the surveillance that often accompanies homelessness (Milligan *et al.*, 2024) and reflecting the stigma of homelessness does not always end once a person is housed (Shier *et al.*, 2007). For example, Blaxley neighbours were quick to alert the onsite caretaker if bins were not taken in quickly enough or mailboxes appeared full. As tenant, Melody, explains, the stigma even came from her family who lived nearby.

Melody: ... *my grandmother has always defended this place. But my grandfather still... 'They put nothing but scum in those houses...' And I'm like, 'Pop, what about me?' 'You're the exception.' I'm always the exception...he just thinks that it's going to bring bad to the community. Quite frankly there's already bad in the community, like, I don't know how much worse it can get!*

Conclusion

For many of the young people interviewed, even if they had lived outside of the family home for years, living in the YHM may have been the first time they had attempted to actively create home. Ideally, 'home' is a place where a person can achieve ontological security that allows them to develop and grow their identity (Robinson, 2011). However, the 'quietness' of stable housing can in itself be distressing as previous experiences of trauma become harder to ignore without the chaos of day to day survival (Robinson, 2011). Therefore, the relational components of YHMs, that included both other young people and support workers and/or caretakers residing nearby, played an important role in supporting young people to manage this transition and create home (Campo *et al.*, 2020).

How these relationships and security were developed were directly influenced by the physical design of the buildings. Specifically, there were three key ways YHMs improved a sense of home through physical structures. First, through the provision of material elements in a timely manner and incorporating in-built designs - such as hooks on the walls - that encouraged a young person to easily personalise their own space. Second, ensuring the provision of communal spaces for recreation and opportunities for connection with other young people. However, it is important that there is capacity for young people to prepare food in their own homes, rather than relying solely on communal kitchens. Third, along with the young person having the ability to retreat to their own room when needed, there is need for consideration

of how to balance the need for security without unnecessary surveillance or restrictions.

Overall, many of the physical adjustments for home need to reflect the fact that even the most 'housing ready' young person will still be carrying experiences of trauma and stigma. For these young people, YHMs can provide vital time and space to develop or strengthen independent living skills and build connections in a supportive environment. That being said, the significant structural barriers to affordable and sustainable housing for young people are unlikely to be fully addressed within the 1–2 years of respite that many YHMs offer. Young people indicated that it was only with time, and the ability to personalise and feel ownership of their space, that they began to be able to shift from place-making to home-making (Hoolachan, 2022). Extending the length of stay could enable young people to fully benefit from the physical and material dimensions of home that YHMs offer.

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