

Centenary flashback: Aboriginal housing history, part 2

In 1967 an amendment was made to the Australian Constitution to recognise the full citizenship rights of Aboriginal people. Following the amendment, concerns about sub-standard living conditions for Aboriginal families soon arose.

Perth academic, Henry Schapper, described WA's Aboriginal housing policy as segregationist in terms of location, appearance, standard and administration.

"Hundreds of Aboriginal families live in transitional housing provided by us, the non-Aboriginal people. Most of this housing is little more than superior shelter with a communal toilet, shower and laundry facilities," Schapper said.

"Some Aboriginals prefer their wurleys and erect them nearby whilst transitional facilities remain vacant and unused."



Wash room facilities at a Native Reserve in Merredin, 1960s

Schapper also questioned why Europeans were able to obtain public housing through the State Housing Commission, while Aboriginal people had to go through the Department of Native Welfare (known today as the Department of Indigenous Affairs).

As a result of public criticism, the Commission took over the housing function from the Department of Native Welfare in 1972. A review undertaken that same year revealed "of an estimated 30,000 people of Aboriginal descent in Western Australia, only around 5,000 were adequately housed".



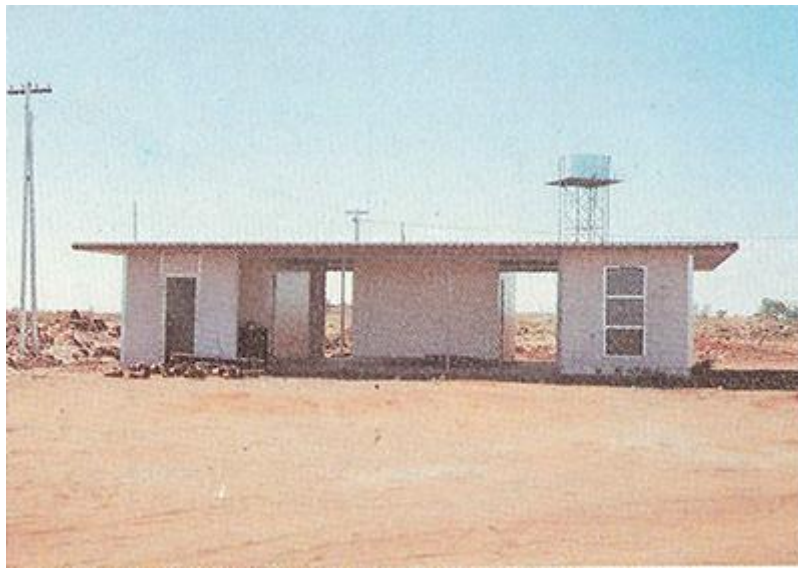
A group of 100 Aboriginal people marching to the State Housing Commission's head office to protest about Aboriginal housing. Protestors sat in the head office foyer until the general manager agreed to see them, 1976

In 1973, the Commission undertook one of its first solo duties as Aboriginal housing provider - to provide accommodation to communities in remote areas. The accommodation was referred to as 'village housing.'

Instead of building standard public housing, the Commission, for the first time in its history, consulted directly with the local community to ensure the village designs reflected the culture of the people who lived there.

The villages were then built by the community themselves as part of a self-help scheme which involved Commission supervisors teaching local people building, maintenance and self-management skills.

In 1977, the first village was completed by the Bardi people at One Arm Point, 120km north of Broome.



*Group-style housing and open breezeways were a common design request from local communities when building village housing.
One Arm Point, 1977*

"One Arm Point has 42 houses completed and occupied," the State Housing Commission reported.

"Additional works completed include an office for the Department of Community Welfare, two basketball courts, three transformer sheds, shopping facilities, and the floor for the proposed fish meal factory.

"Another school teacher's residence and pre-school centre have also been commenced."

Following One Arm Point, villages were also built at Looma, Junjuwa, Go Go, Christmas Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Woolshed, Kumanki and Bindi Bindi.



Local residents at Looma erecting their housing as part of the Commission's self-help scheme, 1978

With the Commission anxious to continue involving Aboriginal people in their own housing, the Aboriginal Housing Board was established in 1978.

To be continued...