

Smart Housing: what is it, and marketing good design and construction practice to the private sector.

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I am going to take you through the background of Smart Housing, why the Queensland Department of Housing sees it as being important and how we are trying to encourage its adoption by the private sector.

The Department initiated Smart Housing back in 1998 as part of its strategy to enhance the responsiveness of the Queensland housing system. As with other housing authorities the Department is faced with declining funding and increased need. One of its responses has been to implement a range of innovative strategies. Smart Housing forms one of these strategies.

For the Department, Smart Housing achieves two goals; it is both an alternative way of meeting housing need, and helps to establish a role as a sector leader, making it easier to achieve some of our other objectives.

Through Smart Housing we seek to empower consumers to understand that the decisions that they make when building or renovating their home will affect how well their home will meet their needs both now and into the future. We also try to show industry professionals the often-simple ways a home can be made more comfortable, flexible and affordable.

So often in buying or building a new home we consider cost and aesthetics as the top priority. "Tuscan style" or square metres of living space become the selling mantra. It is only after you take possession of what, for most of us will be our single biggest investment, that we realise our home does not meet all our needs.

- narrow hallways make moving in the favourite couch impossible,
- you feel unsafe fumbling for keys at a dark front door,
- you have an accident and are not able to recuperate in your own home because you can't use the bathroom
- maintenance and running costs start eating into the family budget.

Smart Housing is also important from a whole-of-government perspective.

It is an attempt to respond to the aging population. As people age their housing needs change leading to a massive increase in demand for housing that is flexible enough to accommodate a range of abilities, easy to maintain and secure.

It is important for the environment. According to the Australian Greenhouse Office, Australian households contribute almost one-fifth of Australia's greenhouse gases - more than 15 tonnes per household each year through everyday activities. Encouraging greater energy efficiency in housing will help to contain this figure.

The way our homes work is important in keeping us safe. 45% of all injuries occur in and around the home. Many falls, burns, scalds, poisonings and drownings could be easily prevented by smarter design and appropriate fittings.

Break and enter is on the increase and is a crime that can leave its victims suffering from symptoms such as insomnia, depression and feelings of insecurity. By promoting the principles of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design, Smart Housing can help to reduce its occurrence.

Affordability is also a growing problem. Queensland, and in particular Brisbane, is not immune from the trends that are placing pressure on affordable inner city housing stock. While Smart Housing is not the whole answer its contribution is in showing how quality housing can be achieved at an affordable price.

So that's the why of Smart Housing now what about the how?

At the heart of Smart Housing is the Project Plan.

The plan identifies four key target groups who are important in implementing Smart Housing.

These include:

1. the building and construction industry made up of architects, building designers, town planners, builders, developers and their related trade associations.
2. consumers looking to build or renovate their own home
3. government agencies at both a state and local level who are responsible for planning schemes and building codes.
4. academia, particularly tertiary institutions that are both training the industry professionals of tomorrow and helping to refocus today's professionals.

In order to bring about a change in the practices of each of these groups the Project Plan identifies a four pronged approach.

Firstly, we aim to promote the concept by way of a marketing and publicity campaign.

- Currently we are working on the public display of three houses- one each in Brisbane, Townsville and Cairns. Cairns is opening tomorrow and the Brisbane house, at Algester, will be open at the end of November if you are interested in going to have a look.
- We are organising the Smart Housing Design Awards with the Queensland Master Builders and Smart Housing Construction Awards through the Housing Industry Association.
- We have had a visible presence at the trade fairs, conferences and exhibitions such as the Home Show

- Developed an informative website that aims to capitalise on interest once it has been generated.

The second aspect of the Plan is developing the information that articulates what Smart Housing means in practice. Building the intellectual capital.

We have found this to be an evolutionary process. One where we take best practice in the design and construction of residential dwellings from across a range of sources and distil it into a coherent message. It is also important to link in with the internal standards work of the Department's capital works program.

Establishing this feedback loop means that we now have a cycle where best practice from the private sector can feed into the work of the Department with a similar flow taking place in reverse.

While there may not be such a thing as the perfectly Smart House today through this process we are moving closer.

Tools we use here include:

- Booklet series, of which the first one Universal Housing Design has recently been released. The second one, Safety and Security, is going through the final drafts right now.
- We hold a series of Smart Housing Seminars each year. They give us an opportunity to explore a particular feature of Smart Housing in detail. For example this year we have covered water issues and universal design. We invite key players from across industry, government and academia and time is always allocated for discussion and debate.

The final seminar will take place on 13 November and will cover Safety and Security. If you plan to be in Brisbane then you are more than welcome to attend.

- Future plans include the Smart Housing in Practice bulletins which we hope to get underway soon through the consumer information website - thisplace.com.au.
- The web site will be further developed as a means to both receive and disseminate information.

This process is closely linked with the third of our tactics that of building a strategic network. Our Smart Housing Network extends across industry, government and academia and aims to exploit overlaps and areas of common interests. There are also many members from around Australia and now even New Zealand.

We recognise that with each of the Smart Housing elements we are hardly inventing the wheel here. Most of the work has already been undertaken by

agencies such as Queensland Health and the EPA, innovators in the private sector or agencies in other states. We try to facilitate the coming together of this expertise across all these otherwise disparate areas in a way that results in better housing.

Our Smart Housing Network puts the scientists in touch with the police and gets them talking to the occupational therapists.

- The Smart Housing Seminars have also worked here in providing a key forum for the Network to meet and exchange ideas.
- E-mail updates are a cheap and easy way to get out the latest news surrounding Smart Housing. We also use them to promote the related work of other agencies.

The fourth area of activity specifically targets local government and other state government agencies to maximise support and facilitate implementation.

We have found that because the reach of Smart Housing is so broad that much of the work that needs to be done is the responsibility of other agencies and departments. We are trying to develop support for the program to the extent that Building Codes, local town and cities plans are complimentary to the Smart Housing elements.

So where to from here?

There is much that remains to be done and we have only begun to establish the momentum. We envisage that we will maintain this framework while continuing to expand, improve and develop the activities in each area in order to bring about a change in housing design and construction practice.