

# Aboriginal Housing in Geraldton

THE HISTORICAL AND POLICY CONTEXTS



Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health



## Report One

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This report is the first output of a collaborative research partnership between the Midwest Aboriginal Organisations Alliance (MAOA) and the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH). MAOA is an alliance of 14 lead Aboriginal organisations working collectively to address priority issues of concern to Aboriginal people in the Midwest region of Western Australia. MAOA have entered a research partnership with CUCRH to build the evidence base and strengthen their strategic planning and action in identified priority areas. The first priority area is housing supply and access for Aboriginal people in Geraldton.

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## Use of Terminology and Warning

This report includes primary data excerpts that contain terms and language that may cause offense to some readers. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers should also be aware that this document contains images or names of people who have passed away.



## Introduction

Planning for positive housing futures for Aboriginal people in Geraldton requires a clear understanding of the historical circumstances that produced the current housing situation. There are several important reasons to look back. It helps us to:

- Know where we've come from.
- Remember the legacies of strength within our community.
- Remember the legacies of pain and oppression that we must not repeat. As Spanish philosopher George Santayana once famously declared: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to fulfil it".
- Track longstanding community aspirations and concerns.

In their comprehensive analysis of urban Indigenous housing circumstances, Milligan *et al.* (2011) also explain that 'looking back' is one of the key factors in developing culturally secure and better coordinated social responses to housing need.



Marine Terrace, Geraldton. Early 1900s. Source: Geraldton Regional Library

Understanding the current policy context is also a critical starting point for meaningful, informed and productive dialogue between local Aboriginal people, governments, and other stakeholders, regarding Aboriginal housing solutions in Geraldton.

This report presents the key threads of the historical narrative of Aboriginal housing in Geraldton. It highlights important progressive changes over time. It also highlights a number of long-standing and unresolved struggles that local Aboriginal people have been engaged in to secure positive housing outcomes in Geraldton. The report concludes with several summative reflections about this historical record and the necessary conditions for improving Aboriginal housing outcomes in the City.

## The Original Urban Dwellers

Analysis of historical records show that Aboriginal people were the original and long-term architects of housing and urbanism in the Midwest (Logan, 1998). Prior to 1850 when Geraldton was officially established as a townsite, there were semi-permanent Aboriginal settlements in the region that were marked by well constructed huts, defined pathways, and intensive land and sea management practices (Museum of Western Australia, 2011a; Bain, 1996). The rich natural resource base in the region could sustain a much larger and more permanent population than many other parts of the country:

“ ... The region was densely populated by various tribal groups who spent much of their time around the major river systems and coastal estuaries, and who were affiliated through kin ties ... Their apparent wandering was determined by the availability of food resources which in turn depended upon the season, and they practiced highly intricate and sophisticated land management skills (Logan, 1998 p. 11). ”

Because natural resources were so readily available in the region, seasonal hunting and gathering practices did not require the extensive migrations necessary in inland, desert country. Local settlements were therefore more permanent in nature.

Early experiences of colonial contact in the region were often marked by conflict, which escalated as white settlers travelled to the region in greater numbers. Logan (1998) describes how cultural groups, sometimes from considerably distant regions, would band together in efforts to raid or attack colonial outposts. Such attacks were a defensive response to the encroachment onto their country of foreigners staking claims of ownership and control over the region's resources. These strikes were met with fierce retaliation by settlers (Logan, 1998). Conflicts, coupled with the ravages of disease (particularly measles) in the region saw the local Aboriginal population decimated. As for Aboriginal people across the nation, this violence and disease had devastating effects on individual lives as well as on social and cultural norms (Toussaint, 1995). Logan (1998, p. 22-23) suggests that the premature death of an Aboriginal person due to conflict or disease could have three important effects:

1. 'An increase in inter-group conflict': cultural protocol sometimes demanded an inter-tribal 'pay-back' death following an individual's death, even if that death was caused by disease.
2. 'The loss of food supply for a period of time': the totem of the individual who died was sometimes not touched as a mark of respect.
3. 'The loss of whatever cultural knowledge that individual may have possessed but not yet passed on'.

Logan (1998, p. 23) concluded that: "The culture and way of life of Aboriginal people was therefore being eroded from several directions simultaneously".

Few of those who survived attacks and disease epidemics in the Midwest remained in the region, leaving voluntarily or under duress (Logan 1998). Many were pushed east as colonial development spread. Some, however, remained and lived in huts and shelters made from whatever materials were available to them. Aboriginal people continued to camp in the town's sandhills and along the Greenough River to the south. In her memoir of the early 1900s, Norris (1989) recalls a large encampment of Aboriginal people living on the site now occupied by the town's landmark cathedral. There are also recorded references in the Geraldton Guardian on 24 May 1917 to a 'native camp' near the Flour Mill in Geraldton. An excerpt from the report reads:

“ ... The camp consisted of a tent, a small shed and a bough shed on the top of a hill in the reserve and ten chains from the nearest habitation. The camp was clean and occupied by a family of half-castes named Counsellor, consisting of a widow, her son and his wife, and several children. The site had always been used for a natives' camp and was isolated ... Many natives were working in town and some lived in rented houses in the centre of the town (Geraldton Guardian, 1917, p. 2). ”

### An Upturned Urban Ordering (1930s-60s)

Though originally dominated by Aboriginal presence, urban living on the site now known as 'Geraldton' was changing rapidly as increasing numbers of white settlers migrated to the area in the early decades of the 20th century.

As the town grew, housing for the settler population was in short supply and was generally very basic.

Temporary structures were built hastily with little attempt to adapt to the local climate (Bunning, 1947). There were no regulations guiding the development of settlements with respect to space, light, hygiene, or privacy (Bunning, 1947). While the quality of housing improved with time, supply remained an issue. Lower income groups suffered the most.



Marine Terrace Geraldton 1937  
Source: Geraldton Regional Library

During this period of urban growth in Geraldton, 'protectionism' was the key principle guiding government policy in relation to Aboriginal people (Toussaint, 1995; Sanders, 2000). The widely held view was that the 'Aboriginal race' would eventually die out: those of full Aboriginal descent should be kept separate from the growing settler population until that time, and some of mixed racial descent would be enfolded into mainstream society where their Aboriginality would eventually be 'bred out'. Western Australia had introduced the *Aboriginal Protection Act* in 1886 and the *Aborigines Act* in 1905 as a means for regulating all aspects of an Aboriginal person's life including:

- who was and was not considered an Aboriginal person;
- appropriate marriage alliances;
- where a person could work and live;
- where, and in whose custody, children should live, and;
- level of access to resources such as rations and other allowances (Armitage, 1995).

Aboriginal people were also denied housing and even the most basic facilities (Bunning, 1947). Indeed, prior to World War II there was little, if any, provision for the housing of Aboriginal people in urban areas (Morgan, 1972).

In her memoir *When the Pelican Laughed*, Mrs Nannup noted that when she moved to Geraldton in 1934, there were few Aboriginal families living in the town (Nannup *et al.*, 1995). Most that did – she estimated about five families – camped in primarily make-shift shelters in the sandhills on Quarry Street and Edward Road. At the time, these streets were located on the edge of town, but very near to the Victoria District Hospital.

Nannup recounts numerous instances of being unwelcome at various public gatherings and sites, struggles carving out legitimacy for her children at school and in the health care system, and keenly feeling the gaze of the law on herself and her family at every turn. She explained: "You see, if you were a blackfella in those days, you weren't meant to be seen.." (Nannup *et al.*, 1995 p. 188).



Victoria District Hospital, c1900  
Source: Geraldton Regional Library

This gaze extended to Aboriginal living conditions within the town. There are numerous references to local complaints and concerns about various local camps in Geraldton, and the need for a 'native reserve' (see e.g. Geraldton Guardian and Express 1934;1936).

“ In 1934, the Chief Protector noted an urgent need for an Aboriginal camping site in Geraldton as Aboriginal people were camping by the hospital and had become 'a nuisance'. It was also desired that Aboriginal camps throughout the sandhills be removed and residents relocated on one site ... (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003). ”

The key point of contention regarding such a camping site was where it should be located. There were numerous exchanges between the Department of Native Welfare and the Geraldton Municipal Council on this matter (Geraldton Guardian and Express, 1936; 1938a). Water supply appeared to be one of the chief concerns in site selection. Appropriate distance from the town centre was another.

### Reserve 21856

A key component of the 'protectionism' policy agenda was the creation of Aboriginal 'reserves' through allocation of Crown land. Sites designated for purpose of 'Natives' were often created as places to relocate Aboriginal people considered a nuisance when camped on private land. Aboriginal people were often forced to move following threats to destroy present camp sites (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003).

With no other legitimated spaces to live, reserves served to confine Aboriginal people by placing them under government control (Armitage, 1995). In much of WA, reserves were placed far enough from town sites to curb unsolicited contact with non-Aboriginal settlers, but close enough for farmers to draw on the inhabitants for their labour (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003). The living conditions on reserves were poor. They lacked basic facilities and infrastructure, including water, ablution, and laundry facilities. Ironically, the unsanitary conditions Aboriginal people were made to endure were used to justify further segregation, including the removal of Aboriginal children from public schools (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003).

In 1938, the Chief Protector of Aborigines visited Geraldton to announce the establishment of a 100-acre 'Native Reserve' to be located some distance from the town. Nannup recalls the occasion of Mr Neville's visit to Geraldton in vivid detail. He stopped by her camp on Quarry Street and expressed shock and disappointment in her for living there.

“ He was the last man I wanted to see. I felt terrible but I wasn't living there because I wanted to – we had four kids, and steady work wasn't easy to get. Even if you had the money, you couldn't just go and find a place to rent – white people had first option there. If you were an Aboriginal family, you had to get someone to recommend you for a place first ... (Nannup *et al.*, p. 167). ”



Mrs Nannup understood that Mr Neville’s visit was intended to encourage Aboriginal families to relocate to the reserve because the town was expanding and the Municipal Council wanted to develop a new suburb where she and a number of other Aboriginal families were camped. The ‘problem’ of Aboriginal housing in Geraldton was being pushed, literally and figuratively, to the fringes of town.

A police sergeant was dispatched to order Aboriginal families to move to the reserve. Nannup recalls, however, that Aboriginal people didn’t want to move and most ignored these orders. An excerpt from a 1938 letter from the Protector of Natives in Geraldton to the Commissioner of Native Affairs confirms these sentiments. Inspector Thompson wrote:

“ Referring to your memo of the 15th instant, I note that the natives have been warned to remove to the new reserve, but so far they have failed to obey the instructions and have intimated that they do not intend to move. ”

Aboriginal residents resisted attempts to move them to the reserve by spreading out to different locations in Geraldton: “Everyone went everywhere.”(Nannup *et al.*, 1995 p. 168).

A report in the Geraldton Guardian on 20 December, 1938 explained that resistance to the reserve was in anticipation of the poor living conditions they would be expected to endure there:

“ In connection with the Native Reserve on Eastern Road a special report prepared by the Health Inspector (Mr R. A. Dunne) was discussed at the meeting of the Municipal Council last week, at which Cr T Askew presided. The town clerk said the position was that the natives would not go to the new reserve, as they did not think it was satisfactory. They had scattered in various parts of the town, some on to private property, and some were at the old bacon factory. There was an absence of sanitary arrangements, which if allowed to continue, would create a most unsatisfactory position ... The health inspector (Mr R. A. Dunne) pointed out what he considered to be deficiencies in connection with the sanitary arrangements at the new reserve, and also in connection with the construction of huts (Geraldton Guardian and Express, 1938b p.3). ”



1953 map of outer Geraldton showing ‘Native Reserve’ 21856  
Source: Geraldton Regional Library

Eventually the Nannups moved to the reserve and Mrs Nannup described the condition of the 'huts' that had been provided for them:

“ When Mr Neville said the government were going to build houses we thought they'd be proper houses. But these were just shacks. They built them out of a few sheets of corrugated iron knocked together into two rooms. There wasn't any lining on the walls and they didn't even reach all the way down to the ground. There was a gap of about eight inches between the floor and where the wall began, so the wind used to tear through. The floor had no covering, it was just dirt and I didn't like the idea of that for the kids. For water, they just put a standpipe about fifty yards away, and there was no fireplace to cook over. Our place in Quarry St might not have been great, but this was certainly no better. It was obvious from my days working as a housemaid that what meant houses for white people meant quite another thing for us (Nannup *et al.*, 1995, p. 171). ”

### The Birth of the Public Housing System

By the late 1930s, the general Australian housing crisis had also become extreme. The poor conditions generated during the Great Depression deepened with the onset of World War II (Hayward, 1996). There were chronic housing shortages, many substandard houses that needed replacement, escalating building costs, and a lack of private investment. In early 1943, the Federal Government established the Commonwealth Housing Commission to conduct an inquiry into the housing crisis. The inquiry found there was an estimated national housing shortage of 300 000 dwellings. It concluded that the private market was unable to provide adequate housing for low-income earners but that housing should be a right for all citizens (Hayward, 1996). Consequently, a national public housing system was established in 1945 when the first Commonwealth State Housing Agreements (CSHAs) were signed.

Through the CSHAs, the Federal Government would provide funding to each State and Territory to administer the system in their respective jurisdictions. While most other States and Territories had already established Housing Commissions to assist residents with housing needs, Western Australia (WA) was one of the last two States to do so. Even when it did, it was primarily for the purpose of administering the CHSA. In his analysis of the Australian public housing system through history, Hayward (1996) argues that though the Federal and State governments established the public housing system, they were 'reluctant landlords'. The policy focus remained on encouraging home ownership. In any case, public housing assistance was not afforded to Aboriginal people at this time since they were not officially recognised as citizens of Australia.

### 'Assimilation' and the 'Geraldton House'

During the period in which the public housing system was being established, Aboriginal people in Geraldton were able to secure more work, but continued to navigate oppressive restrictions about when and where they could be present in town. The early view that the Australian Indigenous population would die out was fading in the wake of a

contradictory reality: the Aboriginal population was in fact growing rapidly (Lovejoy, 1972). ‘Protectionism’ policies were beginning to be replaced by the rhetoric of ‘assimilation’: that Indigenous people should be enfolded into broader Australian society by adopting mainstream socio-cultural and economic practices. In Geraldton, however, this policy shift was slow to effect change. For two decades, it manifested in growing concerns about the quality of, and hygiene in fringe settlements and reserves (Lovejoy, 1972; Morgan, 1972).

Nannup noted that increasing numbers of Aboriginal families had begun moving into Geraldton and had set up camps in different locales near and on the reserve. Others remained in camps on Quarry Street and Eastern Road for a number of years. Kathleen Gregory and her family, for example, did not relocate to the reserve from Eastern Road until 1949. By that time, at least six Aboriginal family groups had moved to the reserve (Museum of Western Australia, 2011b). As more Aboriginal families moved into Geraldton, the Municipal Council grew increasingly anxious and wanted to contain Aboriginal presence within the town. An attempt was made to ban Aboriginal people from rights to purchase and own homes in towns within the Murchison region. The Council wrote several times to the Administrator of Native Affairs seeking their assistance in taking action to accommodate the growing numbers of Aboriginal people within Geraldton. There was a growing recognition that the reserve conditions were unacceptable. Notes from a Council meeting printed in the Geraldton Guardian and Express from 6 February 1946 highlight this point:

“ Attention was drawn to the unsatisfactory conditions which obtained on the reserve near Geraldton, where the poor standard of housing and the deplorable sanitary conveniences had driven the occupants of this area to seek better accommodation in town (Geraldton Guardian and Express, 1946, p. 6). ”

These discussions continued for a further five years. A letter to the Geraldton Guardian on the 10 February 1949, addressing ‘the Native Question’, highlighted the poor condition of housing provision for Aboriginal people once again. Though paternalistic in tone, it also introduced sharp commentary regarding government practice in this domain:

“ The natives, with so many others in the community, are deleteriously affected and put at a very distinct disadvantage by the acute housing position. A first prerequisite to raising the living standards of these people is to supply them with suitable homes. The old native reserve is totally inadequate and is an indictment of those who selected it. Its sandy nature and inaccessibility to the town condemns it without going further into its obvious disadvantages for the purpose for which it was intended. Until it is possible to adequately house these people little can be achieved to improve their standards or outlook and it would seem therefore that the first step in their reorientation must be based on some comprehensive housing scheme ... The housing scheme for these people needs to be approached with a full appreciation of the debt the community owes them. It is doomed to failure if it is hemmed in by rigid economics and impenetrable red tape, so characteristic of everything undertaken by Governments (Geraldton Guardian, 1949, p.2). ”

In 1951, a second reserve was eventually established on the northern coastal fringe of Geraldton (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003, p. 124). This site was selected after vigorous local debate, primarily because access to a water source (the ocean and Chapman River) was seen as a critical factor that had been absent at Reserve 21856.

In 1953, Mr Frank Gare was stationed to Geraldton as the District Officer of the Native Welfare Department. His job was to attend to the basic needs of Aboriginal reserves within the region. Nannup recalls Mr Gare's efforts to improve reserve housing in Geraldton:

“ These houses were much better than the ones built in Mr Neville's time. They had two bedrooms, one up each end, a kitchen in the middle, a big veranda along the front and hot and cold water for the shower recess. They didn't have their own toilets, though – there was a communal block, separate ones for men and women. These houses were certainly an improvement, but a bit too small for my large family (Nannup *et al.*, p. 200). ”



1953 map of outer Geraldton showing the second 'Native Reserve'  
Source: Geraldton Regional Library

Other assessments were not as gracious:

“ The reserve houses were a state-wide standard design of steel frames on a concrete slab with tin roofing, no ceiling, and single-sheet tin partition-like walls that did not touch the floor or reach the roof. Often there were no floor coverings, just the bare concrete particularly in the large living spaces in the middle (Little, 2000, p. 171). ”

The 'Geraldton house', as it became known, was used on reserves in both Geraldton and Mullewa and became a prototype described as popular amongst Aboriginal people and approved by local authorities (Morgan, 1972). Mr. Gare, however, regretted that the 'Geraldton house', was rolled out across reserves in other parts of the State where weather and climatic conditions were not conducive to such a design. Indeed Aboriginal families would abandon these often un-insulated and inflexible designs, and construct their own more culturally and climatically appropriate shelters (Grant and Memmott, 2007). Despite deficiencies, the provision of dwellings was viewed as a milestone because it was an



acknowledgement that the Aboriginal population needed permanent homes, even if only basic enough to protect them from the elements (Morgan, 1972).

1958 aerial photograph of outer Geraldton showing Reserve 21856 houses in the top right cluster as well as various temporary camps along 'Blood Alley'.  
Source: Geraldton Regional Library

## The More Things Change ... (1960s–90s)

In the 1960s, housing became a fundamental vehicle for driving assimilation policies. Aboriginal camps were reformed and transitional public housing programs were introduced (Grant and Memmott, 2007). It was believed that 'suitable' Aboriginal candidates would adopt 'mainstream' values when they were taught to live in European-style homes (Lydon, 2009). Part-Aboriginal couples who had been deemed to have reached a reasonable standard of living were selected to move into urban areas (Grant and Memmott, 2007). This policy initiative had been foreshadowed almost two decades earlier by F. Bateman in his influential survey of all Native reserves and settlements in Western Australia:

“ I believe that a housing scheme would be a worthwhile experiment for selected families. There are many who, if given the opportunity, would respond to better housing but they are unable to progress in this matter without assistance. I would suggest that the government erect, as an experimental venture, a small number of adequate houses on approved sites for a few specially selected families. These sites should be selected after consultation with local authorities and should not be on the present reserves. It would be undesirable to make the natives a gift of these quarters as they must be taught to assist themselves. They nearly all earn good wages now and are in a position to pay a small rental. If they do not respond they should be returned or removed to a settlement and another family provided with the accommodation. This would probably serve as an incentive for them to better their conditions and improve their lot. Such a scheme may not be practicable at present but should be instituted when possible (Bateman, 1948, p. 32).

”

## Transitional Housing

In allocating land for 'native housing' little consideration was given to location and availability of resources for the development and servicing of sites (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003). Development was hindered by insufficient funds to meet the housing need and slow construction of housing at the various stages (Grant and Memmott, 2007). In many towns, racial opposition by both residents and shire councils further limited the location and availability of homes to Indigenous residents. Further, strict conditions regarding the provision of homes meant that many Aboriginal families faced social isolation by choosing to live in more urban environments (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003; Grant and Memmott, 2007). Aboriginal people encountered considerable pressure to become 'respectable' citizens, and conform to non-Indigenous norms with regard to privacy, sobriety, 'moral restraint', nuclear families, conventional gender roles, and wage labour (Morgan, 2000).

Despite the challenges, the policy shifts did provide some who were previously living on reserves or dilapidated inner-city housing with a standard of housing previously only enjoyed by non-Aboriginal people. Demand for Aboriginal housing considerably outstripped supply. In 1963, it was estimated that the State Government required provision of 2000 houses for Aboriginal people, but only 298 dwellings had been provided up to that time (Lovejoy, 1972).

In Geraldton, both 'Native Reserves' were officially closed in the late 1960s. The Department of Native Welfare began purchasing and constructing basic housing in Wonthella and Rangeway for Aboriginal people (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003). There was an (arguably superficial) attempt to overturn the practices of concentrating and quarantining Aboriginal presence on the urban fringe. In reality, most Aboriginal houses were still located on the fringes of the town, and indeed even on the site of the old reserve. In addition, the title of these 'mini reserves' was held by the government, so there was no possibility for Aboriginal people own the land or the house in which they lived (Lovejoy, 1972).

These subtle shifts coincided with the 1967 referendum. The affirmative vote granted that that the Federal Government could now pass laws relating to, and collect statistical information about, Aboriginal people. Policy reform would follow to address concerns over structural disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal Australians (Sanders, 2000). There were a number of changes in the administration of Aboriginal housing in WA following the referendum. An Aboriginal Housing Board was established in 1970 and the *Aboriginal Affairs Planning and Authority Act, 1972* replaced the *Native Welfare Act, 1963* (Armitage, 1995). The Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority assumed responsibility for the coordination of State Government activities in Aboriginal Affairs (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2003). Aboriginal housing also became 'mainstreamed' under the State Housing Commission's portfolio (Milligan *et al.*, 2010).



Marine Terrace Geraldton c1970s. Source: Geraldton Regional Library

### Public Housing and Aboriginal People

By this time, the public housing system's construction program had gathered considerable momentum. Possibly in response to the critical housing need, the majority of the existing housing stock within the Midwest region was built in the 1960s and 1970s (Valesini and Cameron, 1999). By 1966, public housing constituted 14% of the State's total dwellings (Hayward, 1996). However, unit costs of houses were high, limiting the number of people who would be assisted (Goldstein *et al.*, 1990). Further, public housing properties were very basic and not well maintained. The government had made a conscious decision not to increase rents or terminate contracts if a tenant's economic status improved after being allocated a public rental property (Hayward, 1996). This, it argued, would appear to be punishing behaviour that should be encouraged. The government also assumed that because public housing properties were basic and not well maintained, tenants would want to transition out of public housing as soon as their economic situation improved (Hayward, 1996).

Rod Little and his family were among those migrating to Geraldton in the early 1970s. He recalled that there was very little housing available for Aboriginal people at the time and the house his family was allocated was too small to accommodate them adequately (Little, 2000). This was a common experience: “Many Aboriginal families were fairly large and the waiting list was four years for a four-bedroom house” (Little, 2000, p. 173). Five bedroom houses did not appear to exist. Little describes Aboriginal housing in Geraldton during the period from the 1970s to 1990s as being characterised by:

- poor living conditions – Aboriginal families were repeatedly placed in houses that were not fit for occupancy;
- prejudice and discrimination, and;
- alienation – many Aboriginal families were ‘locked out’ of the public housing system through insurmountable tenancy exiting maintenance bills which resulted in unpaid debts.

Little (2000) believed that many of the quoted maintenance costs were outrageous, but only those who protested vigorously received reductions. Many tenants did not question the accounts and were subsequently ineligible to apply for further housing within the public system because of unpaid debt accrued on their previous tenancy. Nationwide, as in Geraldton, the major housing concerns for many Aboriginal people related to inadequate supply of public housing, restricted access to private rentals, and limited opportunities for home ownership (Macintyre, 1974).

### Changes in the 1980s and 90s

In 1984, a landmark new CSHA was signed. This agreement included specific provisions, and associated funding, for rental programs for Aboriginal people. Federal funds were directed primarily toward building new houses in rural and remote locales. Limited resources were allocated to maintenance or housing in urban centres (FaHCSIA, 2010). In 1986, the Murchison Region Aboriginal Corporation (MRAC) was officially incorporated. When the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was established four years later, it oversaw the management of Aboriginal housing programs and funded Indigenous Housing Organisations (IHOs) to purchase and supply affordable rental accommodation to Aboriginal people living in various locales. MRAC was the IHO for the Midwest region and managed housing for Aboriginal people primarily in Geraldton. It was sustained through rental income generated and funding from ATSIC.

Throughout the 1990s, issues of access to affordable, quality housing continued to prove challenging for Aboriginal people. The WA public housing system, now named ‘Homeswest’, was weathered after enduring several economic boom and bust cycles in the preceding two decades (Hayward, 1996). ‘Homeswest’ was later integrated as the public housing authority within the new, larger Department of Housing and Works (DHW). Aboriginal-specific programs within DHW included the Aboriginal Tenant Support Service, Private Rental Aboriginal Assistance Loan Scheme (PRAALS), an Aboriginal Home Ownership Scheme, and the introduction of Aboriginal Customer Support Officers.



## The Shelter WA Report

In 1999, Shelter WA, in partnership with Homeswest, conducted a workshop on Aboriginal housing in the Midwest region. The forum was attended by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal service agency representatives from Geraldton and several Perth-based Homeswest staff. There were 32 participants in all. The resulting report detailed several areas of concern, all with regard to Aboriginal housing (Valesini and Cameron, 1999). These can be loosely grouped together around the following themes:

- Departmental Staffing Issues – Community members expressed concern that there were not enough Aboriginal staff employed at DHWs Geraldton office. Indeed the Geraldton office had the lowest proportion of Aboriginal staff in the State. There had also been a high turnover of Aboriginal staff through the office in the past. Customer service within the regional office was also noted as a point of concern. Counter staff were described as often being abrupt or condescending toward Aboriginal clients – embarrassing and belittling them with the tone and tenor of their communication.
- Departmental Process – Concern was expressed at the forum that the tenancy process was too complex and some Aboriginal families were not sufficiently supported to navigate it. For example, the ingoing Property Condition Report (PCR) was not as detailed as the outgoing PCR and few tenants completed it because they didn't understand its importance or implications. The end result was often significant repair and maintenance charges to the tenant upon completion of their tenancy. The Supported Housing Accommodation Officer (SHAP) was relied on too heavily to help Aboriginal tenants with PCRs.
- Circumstance-Appropriate Housing – The consultations raised concerns regarding the housing security for Aboriginal tenants in circumstances of family breakdown. Participants also indicated that there was insufficient accommodation for young people within Geraldton.

## The Turn of a New Century (2000–2008)

In 2001, the Federal Government introduced the Building Better Futures (BBF) initiative: a 10-year program aimed at alleviating Indigenous homelessness and housing affordability pressures, and reducing overcrowding. By 2005, however, BBF funding had not been released for urban areas and the Commonwealth decided to redirect all monies to remote areas (Milligan *et al.*, 2010). This reignited the debate about which level of government should be responsible for Aboriginal housing in urban areas (Milligan *et al.*, 2010). A study conducted at the halfway point of the implementation process revealed little positive change for Geraldton Aboriginal residents.

## Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) Study

The overarching finding of the 2005 AHURI study was that the lack of appropriate and affordable housing was the primary issue of concern for almost every one of the 28 residents and housing agency workers who participated in the study (Flatau *et al.*, 2005, p. 139). The study participants included seven State Government agency representatives, 14 non-government support agency representatives, and seven community members. Twenty-four of the interviewees were Aboriginal.

Interviewees spoke consistently about unacceptably long waiting periods for public housing and supply that was not maintaining pace with demand. The study found that crisis accommodation in Geraldton was permanently full and concluded that supply-side problems must be addressed in Geraldton (Flatau *et al.*, 2005). The study also identified a range of secondary concerns regarding housing for Aboriginal people in Geraldton.

### Housing Quality

As Little (2000) had found many years earlier, interviewees noted that public housing in Geraldton was not of a sufficient standard. In part, this was attributed to a lack of responsiveness from DHW in relation to request for repair and maintenance. For some tenants, health issues were attributed to the poor state of their housing. A counter view held that some people lied about their health in an attempt to obtain better housing. In either case, many tenants were unsatisfied with the standard of their housing.

### Housing Design

The study found that many houses were not deemed to be of sufficient size to properly accommodate Aboriginal families. This was again consistent with Little's (2000) observations several decades earlier: many Aboriginal families are large in size and are not easily accommodated within the common three-bedroom, one-bathroom public housing configuration. Interviewees indicated that a five-bedroom, two-bathroom design was preferable (Flatau *et al.*, 2005). Small houses on large blocks were considered too costly and impractical for tenants to maintain. Participants suggested that larger houses with smaller yards could accommodate more people and reduce expenses related with yard maintenance. Verandas were also considered important.

### Housing Location

According to Flatau *et al.* (2005), the adjacent placement of feuding families in public housing was a major concern within the Geraldton community. Many Aboriginal residents had fewer reservations about being placed next to non-Aboriginal neighbours than Aboriginal neighbours with whom they were in conflict. There was a suggestion amongst interviewees that the Aboriginal community preferred a dispersed allocation policy, rather than being co-located in suburbs with high concentrations of Aboriginal residents.

### Departmental Staffing Issues

As in the Shelter WA report six years prior, the AHURI study noted a call amongst service providers in Geraldton for the employment of more Aboriginal staff at the DHW's Geraldton office. In particular, there was an identified need for an Aboriginal person at the front counter: someone who could sit down with Aboriginal clients as their first point of contact, to identify what action needed to be taken, and arrange appropriate contact points.

The study noted that Aboriginal staff who had worked at DHW in the past had found it very challenging (Flatau *et al.*, 2005). They were balancing crushing workloads with family expectations and cultures that sometimes weren't supportive. Often, Aboriginal clients wanted to deal with Aboriginal staff as a first point of contact to mediate diverse and complex concerns and conflicts with DHW. This often became overwhelming for Aboriginal staff members. Those that were able to manage these demands were often promoted to positions where they no longer had direct contact with clients.

At the time of the study, the Regional Manager and Deputy at DHW had a good reputation within the community. However, there was concern about the attitudes and capabilities of some other staff, particularly those at the front counter. Interviewees indicated that these staff provided insufficient details to presenting clients, did not explain things adequately, were not patient, and talked too loudly (Flatau *et al.*, 2005). There was a suggestion that DHW staff should undertake cross-cultural training. The study identified a general lack of trust of housing agencies amongst Aboriginal people. Some interviewees explained that Aboriginal people often asked non-government agencies to approach Homeswest on their behalf.

There was recognition amongst non-government interviewees that DHW was acutely stretched resource-wise with individual officers managing extraordinary caseloads. There were also long-standing tensions between DHW and the local Aboriginal community that were entrenched and challenging to overcome (Flatau *et al.*, 2005).

### Departmental Process

Interview data from the study revealed a perception that DHW could be a disempowering environment for many Aboriginal people in terms of communication. Certain literacy levels were assumed in the Department's communication processes. Further, not all tenants understood rental policies and language. For example, few people realised they could still apply for public housing even if they had incurred debt on a previous tenancy, as long as they agreed to enter a debt repayment scheme. Many simply did not bother to approach DHW to get onto the waiting list, assuming they would be 'knocked back' if they did. Most non-government agencies also seemed unaware of the debt repayment scheme. It was difficult for tenants to remain tenancy literate when the policies seemed to change with alarming regularity.

The study identified continued calls for a more robust process to support entering tenants with PCR's and to explain tenant and departmental rights and responsibilities at the beginning of new tenancies (Flatau *et al.*, 2005). Interviewees suggested that more support needed to be invested at

the beginning of tenancies rather than concentrating them around tenancies at risk (e.g. SHAP). Differences between the management of mainstream and Aboriginal specific housing was also a point of tension in the community.

### Cultural Considerations

The study indicated that a cultural mismatch was one of the key factors influencing poor housing outcomes for Aboriginal people in Geraldton: “At a very broad level many of the Indigenous interviewees referred to an overall cultural mismatch in providing mainstream housing to Indigenous people” (Flatau *et al.*, 2005 p. 145). The study suggested that there were two key areas of mismatch:

1. Mobility. Aboriginal people tended to move frequently between homes and localities, sometimes because they could not secure permanent housing. This movement often resulted in would-be-tenants being removed from the housing waiting list, as posted DHW communication was not received. This practice surfaced a fundamental issue: that housing provision generally assumes a sedentary population and Aboriginal people often do not conform to these expected demographic norms.
2. Family obligations. Sometimes the requirement to house and care for family can place financial and social pressures on tenants who are then unable to pay their rent, and may incur property damage from overcrowding. Both rental arrears and unmanageable maintenance bills can lead to eviction. Aboriginal women were often disproportionately affected by these dynamics:

“A number of those interviewed pointed to the fact that public housing tenancies were often in the name of women and so when tenancy problems arose it was women who dealt with the consequences. A particular cause of concern was that of violent partners who might be the source of maintenance bills, anti-social complaints and ultimately eviction. Women who call the police and report their partner to Homeswest avoid being made responsible for any damage. However, fear of deaths in custody and fear of their partners was cited as reasons why this does not occur in a lot of cases (Flatau *et al.*, 2005, p. 147-148).”

### The Demise of ATSIC and the Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry

At the time of Flatau *et al.*'s (2005) research, ATSIC was being decommissioned. In assessing the probable impact of its demise, a Senate Committee on the administration of Indigenous affairs explained:

“Under the new arrangements ... programs in Indigenous housing, legal aid, the arts and other areas will be dissolved into large Commonwealth departments whose primary objectives are much broader. Though the programs will be retained in name, inevitably they will fall under the cultural influence and values of those mainstream organisations. Their specific Indigenous focus could well be lost. At the

same time, it will become more difficult for Indigenous people themselves, and also for the Parliament, to monitor and evaluate the performance of the government in providing for the needs of Indigenous citizens (Curtis *et al.*, 2005, p. xvii). ”

MRAC, which had developed a portfolio of some 100 houses to manage across the region, now had a less secure funding stream from which to operate.

Several broader processes also influenced the circumstances described in the AHURI study. In 2004, the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) tabled the findings of a wide-reaching inquiry into discriminatory practices within DHW (EOC, 2004). It found discrimination was endemic in many of the Department’s processes and structures and recommended major reforms. Data would later show that between 2003 and 2008, there was an increase of 101.1% of Indigenous public housing clients in non-remote areas: a change from 2363-4751 tenancies (Milligan *et al.*, 2010). Interestingly though, over the same period, there was an overall decline in public housing dwellings occupied across the State. There must therefore have been a significant decrease in the number of non-Indigenous tenancies allocated during this period. By 2008, 15.7% of all WA public housing tenancies were Indigenous (Milligan *et al.*, 2010). This percentage was well above almost every other State and Territory.

### The Map and Gap Analysis (MAGA)

In 2010, the WA Department of Indigenous Affairs commissioned a mapping and gapping analysis of services for Aboriginal people in the Midwest region (Cant *et al.*, 2010). It again identified a lack of housing as a pressing concern in the region. Shortages were most acute in the Murchison sub-region for which Geraldton is the closest regional city, and for large families and young people in particular. It also indicated that these housing shortages had produced overcrowded homes, which had in turn led to a raft of social problems. The report explained that although there were a range of community and non-government organisations providing housing and crisis accommodation in Geraldton, there was a lack of community knowledge regarding available support services. According to the MAGA, home ownership and private rental accommodation were options financially beyond the reach of many Aboriginal people in the region.

In relation to public housing, the report indicated that there continues to be a tenuous relationship between many Aboriginal communities in the region and the Western Australian Department of Housing (DoH: formerly DHW), particularly with regard to transparent process and the provision of information that is clear and accurate for Aboriginal clients. Long waiting times for basic repair and maintenance place further strain on the relationship. The MAGA also identified a significant problem with gauging housing need for Aboriginal people in the region:

“ The community view is that the housing need is far greater than the Department recognizes because many people are not on the waiting list and/or have dropped off because they do not register every 12 months. There is a need for much better data about the level of unmet need for Aboriginal housing in Geraldton ... (Cant *et al.*, 2010, p. 39). ”

## The Current Housing Policy Context

### The Federal Context

In 2008, sweeping national housing reforms were introduced. The CSHA, which had constituted the national housing policy and funding framework for over 50 years, was replaced by the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA). The policy emphasis of the NAHA has shifted from programs (under the CSHA) to outcomes (Milligan *et al.*, 2010). Rather than tying funds to particular programs such as the Aboriginal Rental Housing Program, the Commonwealth has now given States full budget flexibility to allocate funds as they see fit. Each State will be required to monitor and report on outcomes to the Commonwealth in areas of Indigenous home ownership, access to private rental housing, overcrowding, and homelessness in urban areas. The NAHA sets broad targets, agreed by the Commonwealth and its State counterparts in relation to Indigenous housing, using terms such as 'improved housing amenity', 'reduced overcrowding', and having the same 'housing opportunities ... as other Australians'. However, as the following section explains, in Western Australia, this shift in funding allocation and conditionality arrangements has resulted in a greater 'mainstreaming' of previously Aboriginal-specific housing programs and structures.

Perhaps most importantly for urban centres such as Geraldton, the NAHA provides little certainty with regard to commitments to meet Aboriginal housing needs in urban areas. Under the CSHAs prior to 2009, a proportion of urban public housing tenancies were set aside for Indigenous tenants. Under the NAHA, such allocations are at the discretion of the States. And, as Milligan *et al.* (2010, p. 3) explain, "... the level of resources that will be available to meet the measured housing needs of urban Indigenous households is unclear".

Some Indigenous-specific funding (\$5.5 billion) remains earmarked for remote areas under the 10-year Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH). Recent advice from FaCHSIA indicates that \$334 million (6.25%) of this NPARIH funding will be used to drive reforms in the Indigenous Community Housing sector in urban and regional Australia. Besides this investment, States will be required to leverage funding from the NAHA, other COAG agreements and other sources, to improve housing outcomes for Aboriginal people in urban areas. Two main funding initiatives relevant here are:

1. The COAG National Partnership Agreement on Social Housing, which is not Indigenous specific, has a far smaller budget than the remote housing agreement (\$400 million), and will run for a much shorter period (until June 2012) to fund an additional 1900 social housing dwellings in urban and regional areas; and,
2. A one-off economic stimulus package program (Nation Building and Jobs Plan Social Housing Initiative). This program is not Indigenous-specific and only running until 2012 but has a significantly larger budget of \$5.65 billion to construct 19 600 social housing dwellings nationally.

Under these two initiatives 56 dwellings were constructed in Geraldton at a total Commonwealth contribution of \$18.5m. Four of these dwellings were allocated to Aboriginal households. More importantly though, no long-term urban social housing

growth plans have been developed or costed, and neither of the initiatives listed above include Indigenous-specific funding (Milligan *et al.*, 2010).

Another major recent shift in Federal housing policy that has significant implications for affordable housing in Geraldton is that State and Federal Housing Ministers have agreed to work toward greater outsourcing of social housing<sup>1</sup> provision. Under these arrangements, DoH will have a reduced role in managing affordable rental housing. The COAG goal is that by 2012, up to 35% of urban social housing will be managed by non-government providers.

Within this non-government provider mix, Indigenous Housing Organisations (IHOs) such as MRAC occupy an increasingly marginal role. In WA, the IHO sector had already drastically contracted when Community Development Employment Projects were defunded in many regional cities and towns. Today, MRAC is one of only five IHOs still remaining in urban WA. Like all urban IHOs, it faces enormous challenges to viability. On the one hand, governments are encouraging growth, entrepreneurship, capacity building, and greater participation in social housing within the not-for-profit sector. On the other hand, as Milligan *et al.* (2010) argue, IHOs are operating in environments characterised by multiple compliance and reporting requirements, complex accountabilities, intense scrutiny, and in some cases, coercion to relinquish assets and control to the government.

Unlike in the past where their funding was secure and separate within CSHAs, IHOs are also being integrated into broader funding and regulatory regimes where they will be forced to compete for funding within a vastly larger pool of housing providers. In their analysis of IHOs' present operating context, Milligan *et al.* (2010, p. 44) concluded that:

“ ... in a rush to reform via a top down approach that so far appears to have lacked effective consultation and sufficient time for Indigenous engagement, many IHOs appear to be vulnerable and there is an emerging backlash against government control and coercion. ”

### The Western Australian Context

Western Australia has responded to the transition from CSHA's to the NAHA with a new Department of Housing (DoH) strategy to 2020: *'Opening Doors to Affordable Housing'* (DoH, 2010). The document describes a steady decline in housing affordability over the last 30 years in WA and a consequent growing demand for housing among low-to-moderate income earners, particularly in regional areas. It argues that housing policy reform is required to meet these growing demands. There are arguably three clear shifts within this new policy framework that have relevance for Aboriginal people living in Geraldton: the diversification of the social housing market; a renewed emphasis on fast transitions through the housing continuum; and the mainstreaming of Aboriginal tenancy management.

<sup>1</sup>'Social housing' refers to all low-cost rental housing that is provided at rates determined by factors other than market value. It includes public housing and affordable housing provided by not-for-profit organisations.

## 1. Diversification of the Social Housing Market

In line with national trends, *Opening Doors* sets out DoH's strategy for encouraging the not-for-profit sector to play a greater role in the provision and management of affordable housing. The policy suggests that a healthy housing continuum is required which allows different level income earners to have multiple housing options available to them (DoH, 2010). It targets partnerships with the not-for-profit sector as a key mechanism for creating a 'contestable market' and alleviating the shortage of affordable housing for middle and low income earners in urban areas:

“ The Department of Housing will oversee the implementation of this strategy and facilitate partnership opportunities with housing providers from other sectors. Over time, this will likely see a diversification of its role as the primary provider of social housing as other not-for-profit, private and community stakeholders increase their presence ... The Department of Housing will become an arms-length enabler and broader policy resource on housing issues rather than the sole provider of subsidised public rentals (DoH, 2010, p. 23 and 25). ”

DoH's focus will shift away from providing low cost public housing because it is expensive both up front, and in terms of recurrent operational costs. Instead, it proposes the allocation of public resources to organisations best able to enact change, within a 'robust regulatory framework'. Asset transfers and head leases will be provided to housing growth provider organisations who can then secure private finance to construct and manage growing affordable housing portfolios. In Geraldton, for example, the preferred not-for-profit 'regional growth provider' is Community Housing Ltd. DoH is also partnering with Fusion to deliver and manage a set of affordable accommodation units in Geraldton.

DoH states that developing these partnerships will make mobility through the housing continuum (from low cost public housing, to affordable social housing, private rental, and home ownership) easier as it 'inserts rungs' into the housing ladder (DoH, 2010). It differentiates this model from the current 'flat' housing market that provides for very low-income earners through public housing and high-income earners through the private rental and home ownership markets, but largely fails moderate-income earners.

## 2. Fast Transitions through the Continuum

A second clear shift within the *Opening Doors* strategy is DoH's intention to move people through public housing tenancies as quickly as possible. It states: "The concept of social housing for life for all tenants is not financially sustainable and disadvantages those on waitlists and in private rental stress" (DoH, 2010, p. 27). The document argues that when tenants remain in public housing properties for long periods of time, they 'lock up' the limited supply of public properties. Consequently, others in great need cannot be accommodated. DoH will increasingly look toward 'limited-term intervention' where assistance will reflect a 'duration of need' approach.



### 3. Mainstreamed Services

A third, more subtle, shift within *Opening Doors* is the absorption of Aboriginal clients in non-remote locations into general tenancy management practices and processes. *Opening Doors* makes reference to Aboriginal housing on less than a handful of occasions, and aside from a remote Aboriginal housing program, no Aboriginal specific initiatives are discussed or introduced. There is a recognition that Indigenous people are a population group that require specific support, but there is no mention of Indigenous-specific programs in urban areas. Perhaps most alarmingly, there are also no key performance indicators relating to Aboriginal housing outcomes in urban areas. This is somewhat surprising given the parameters for demonstrating improved outcomes within the 2009 NAHA.

Table 1 draws on Milligan *et al.*'s (2010) conceptualization of four kinds of social housing options for Aboriginal people to summarise the key shifts in DoH housing policy since 2008. The far right column indicates the nature of change in policy direction since 2008. Downward arrows indicate a withdrawal of focus and funding and upward arrows indicate areas of increased investment and focus. Table 1 clearly shows that since 2008, the housing policy landscape has shifted markedly and the focus is now on third-party provided and managed affordable housing, with a reduction in Aboriginal-specific services.

Table 1 – The Shifting Housing Policy Matrix in Western Australia

	1984-2008	2008-Present	Change
<b>General Public Housing</b>	Focus of State housing policy and investment. Indigenous tenants constituted a significant portion of public housing tenancies.	Move toward outsourcing of responsibility for social housing provision and management	↓
<b>State Owned and Managed Indigenous Housing (SOMIH)</b>	A proportion of public housing tenancies were earmarked for Indigenous households. About 1/3 of Indigenous tenants occupied SOMIH properties.	National earmarked funding has ceased. The State Government has made no commitments to continue reserving a portion of public housing for Indigenous tenants.	↓
<b>Indigenous Managed Housing</b>	IHOs were almost exclusive providers of housing in remote communities. Funded mostly by the Commonwealth under a range of programs and by WA within CSHAs.	IHOs are required to officially register as housing providers in urban areas. Housing stock in most remote communities is being transitioned to management by DoH.	↓
<b>Mainstream Community Housing</b>	Very small part of the social housing sector	Increasing focus of government funding and support in social	↑

## The Supply Dilemma

A final critical reflection on the *Opening Doors* strategy is that even if it is expertly and efficiently implemented, it will not quickly resolve the severe affordable housing shortage that Western Australia is experiencing. The document states that in December 2010, the public housing wait list stood at 24 586. The *Opening Doors* strategy aims to have created an additional 20 000 'affordable housing opportunities' by 2020. In other words, within the next 8 years not enough new affordable housing will be constructed or made available to meet the current level of demand. By 2013, the government is projecting to build an additional 3500 affordable homes. It is unclear how many, if any, of these will be located in Geraldton. It seems clear that while decisive action is being taken, existing affordable housing pressures in Geraldton will not be alleviated through governmental processes and practices in the short term. Creative alternatives and private enterprise will be required. This presents both challenges and opportunities for Aboriginal people in Geraldton. The challenges, as noted by Milligan *et al.* (2010), include:

- the absence of a long-term funding plan for urban social housing;
- the extent and intensification of mainstreamed housing services, and;
- the disempowerment of the IHO sector.

This period of policy transition also presents opportunities for Aboriginal people in Geraldton with regard to influencing the rollout of policy and practice in affordable housing provision. This may include:

- developing a strong local Aboriginal housing advisory committee to lobby government regarding local needs and maintaining accountability with regard to Aboriginal housing outcomes in the City;
- partnering with existing growth providers such as Community Housing Ltd regarding the design of their service roll out in ways that can effectively address the specific needs of Aboriginal tenants in Geraldton (such as dwelling size and location, allocations policy, and tenancy management policy and communications);
- supporting MRAC to become established as a registered and thriving growth provider in the region; and,
- identifying private industry stakeholders with whom to partner on innovative alternative accommodation solutions for Aboriginal people in Geraldton.

## Conclusion

The introduction to this report suggested that 'looking back' allows us to recall legacies of strength and oppression within the community and to track longstanding aspirations and concerns within the community. What then can be learned of these things from the overview presented above?

With regard to strength, the record shows that Aboriginal people were the original 'urban dwellers' in the place now known as Geraldton and have remained and returned: not as a passive

presence, but with agency and voice. For example, when attempts were made to 'relocate' the 'Aboriginal problem' to the fringes of town, Geraldton Aboriginal residents resisted through evasion and sometimes confrontation: asserting their rights to decent and self-determined living conditions. Throughout the century, Aboriginal voices have called for more equitable and just housing outcomes in Geraldton. Another point of strength is that over time, housing policy has progressed and reformed in positive ways. Through time, segregated and oppressive reserves were abolished, a public housing system was established, and Aboriginal people were recognised as citizens with equal rights to all others. Though this progress has been undoubtedly slow, progress at any speed is cause for optimism about what is possible in the future.

Alongside these legacies of strength, there have been unmistakably unjust practices with regard to housing that have put many Aboriginal people at considerable structural disadvantage over several generations. From the time of earliest colonial contact, Aboriginal people have been pushed, literally and figuratively, to the fringes of Geraldton. Aboriginal presence in the town has historically been viewed as a problem that needed to be solved, but never with regard to the aspirations or perspectives of Aboriginal people themselves. Until very recently, local planning and housing practices have made decisions on behalf of Aboriginal people without their inclusion in the process. This has invariably led to further alienation and poor housing outcomes for Aboriginal people. Somewhat remarkably, the history presented in this report also shows that Aboriginal people were largely excluded from the true housing market until very recently. It was not until the 1970s that home ownership and access to affordable public rental housing even became options for most Aboriginal people. From our 2011 vantage point, this is a short, 30-40 year history when compared with the 130-140 years over which non-Aboriginal people have enjoyed such access.

With regard to concerns and aspirations, two issues in particular have tracked resoundingly over at least 70 years. Put simply, Aboriginal people in Geraldton have continually called for bigger homes, and more of them: from Mrs. Nannup's recollections of the first and second-phase reserve houses as both too small and too basic to accommodate her family, to Rod Little's observations of the severe shortage of decent, appropriately-sized affordable housing for Aboriginal families through the 1970s-90s, to the findings of the 2005 AHURI study. Housing supply and housing size have been of foremost concern within the local Aboriginal community for over 60 years. Yet they remain unresolved despite progressive policy reform, due at least in part to complex socio-cultural, political, and economic factors and circumstances informing both housing supply and design.

Though supply and design appear straightforward, they are not. A collaborative effort between locally-based State and Federal agencies, the Aboriginal community, the City, and private industry will be required to disentangle the key stoppage points, and drive positive change. One of the complicating factors is the complex and regularly changing Federal, State and local housing policy landscape. The analysis presented above shows that local conditions in Geraldton are influenced by policy directives at all three levels of government and a command of these directives is essential to meaningful and informed dialogue regarding productive ways forward for Aboriginal housing in Geraldton.

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