

Inside Melbourne's Ross House, a heritage building filled with charitable souls

ABC Radio Melbourne By Nicole Mills

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PHOTO: Ross House was designed by the prestigious Sydney architectural firm Sulman and Power. (ABC Radio Melbourne: Nicole Mills)

There's a five-storey building in Melbourne's Flinders Lane that's known as Ross House.

You may have seen the 119-year-old red brick tower tucked alongside the city library, close to the cafe-laden laneway of Degraeves Street.

It's prime CBD real estate.

But behind the heritage-listed facade is a unique community working to create a better future for society's most marginalised people.

Ross House is the only self-managed and community-owned not-for-profit building in Australia.

There's no landlord. No external owner.

General manager Michael Griffiths said it belonged to the community, so they made the rules.

"In essence, the tenants can set their own rent which is why it's so unique," he said.

"Rents are actually on a sliding scale, so we charge people what they can afford rather than what we can make."



PHOTO: General manager Michael Griffiths says the members and tenants make up the association. (ABC Radio Melbourne: Nicole Mills)

A part of Melbourne's history

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Ross House was built in 1899 and began its life as a textile warehouse.

It was erected by merchant Sir Frederick Sargood, who commissioned and first lived in the famous Rippon Lea mansion in Elsternwick.

The building, then known as Royston House, was bought by the State Electricity Commission in 1929 and then sold to the RE Ross Trust in 1985.

Ross House Association chair Christine McAuslan, from the Collective of Self Help Groups, said the building's not-for-profit status evolved during a period when community services were fighting for their survival.

"The Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS) had a lot to do with setting this up, and a lot of activists were involved back in the '80s," she said.

"There will always be people working towards social equality and overcoming disadvantage."

She said Ross House was not luxurious, but what it lacked in style it made up for in goodwill.

"The work that people do here is fantastic because it takes a lot of commitment and dedication.

"It's not glamorous, we don't have luxurious facilities, but people love being

The 55 tenants are made up of disability, environment, health, social justice, multicultural and other groups.

There's a similar number of members who use the facilities on occasion; many of them are on the waiting list for permanent tenancy.

Were it not for Ross House, many of these groups would likely be run out of people's living rooms or struggle to market rent.

But this location, close to public transport and in the heart of the vibrant CBD, allows these small groups to be part of something bigger, all the while secure in the knowledge that the lights won't go out.

Let's meet some of them.

Kate Greenwood, Assisi Aid Projects



PHOTO: General manager Michael Griffiths members and tenants make up the association (ABC Radio Melbourne: Nicole Mills)



PHOTO: The building was bought to provide home for small charity and non-profit groups (ABC Radio Melbourne: Nicole Mills)



PHOTO: Káte Greenwood says Ross House is full of grassroots organisations. (ABC Radio Melbourne: Nicole Mills)

"We work on community development projects in India and Cambodia with a strong focus on women's empowerment and gender equality projects.

"[One example is] we work with widows and vulnerable women in Tamil Nadu, which is a very conservative area

"Due to widespread alcoholism, lots of men are dying young and there's so many widows being left behind.

"Not only do they find themselves widowed, and then obviously also in poverty because they lose their livelihood they're socially isolated and shunned.

"We do a lot of work with women to bring them together into self-help groups at the village level. Then our partners provide them with skills training and legal literacy so they can actually apply for their widow's pension and the benefits they're entitled to."

Sheryl Forrester, Shine for Kids



PHOTO: Sheryl Forrester says children with parents in prison often feel like they're the ones being punished. (ABC Radio Melbourne: Nicole Mil

"Shine for Kids is the only national organisation that supports children who have parents that are incarcerated.

"We provide supported transport for children to actually visit their parents in prison, we run school holiday camps work in schools, we also run art therapy classes.

"There's so many stories I could tell you about how these children have been involved in the crimes their parents committed.

"They've seen firsthand the effects of ice and how it destroys a family. They've seen lots of violence.

"They're fairly resilient kids but they really do need someone that they can trust and support and that's what we provide for them.

"It's very, very important that we encourage and support these children so that they do not become the next generation of prisoners."

Jane Rosengrave, Reinforce



PHOTO: Support worker Chris Lowe with Reinforce member Jane Rosengrave. (ABC Radio Melbourne: Nicole Mills)

"Reinforce is a self-advocacy group which is for people with an intellectual disability.

"They have actually been running since the 1980s when the institutions were open. They were telling the govern do the right thing for people with a disability and trying to close those institutions down — in those days when the listened.

"The one thing that I would like to get across to people ... is that us [people with a] disability, we are not a numbe a person and we have got a strong, powerful self-advocacy and we can stand up for ourselves.

"We've got that voice to be heard and we do not demand and have people ta for us like those olden days ... we do not want to be neglected, we want to listened to."

Deb Carveth, Community Music Victoria



PHOTO: Deb Carveth believes society is a better place when people make music together. (ABC Radio Melbourne: Nicole Mills)

"Community Music Victoria exists to get music making happening in our communities as a way to bring people together, to strengthen the fabric of society and give people an opportunity to explore a side of themselves that we believe everyone should have access to.

"When people make music together magic happens, relationships form, there's cohesion.

"It's incredibly important to us to be part of the Ross House community

"Everybody here is working towards positive societal change through advocacy, through self-help and it's a great use of resources.

"It's really heart-warming to walk through those doors in such a busy, vibrant part of Melbourne and to enter the environment that Ross House supports and enables."

Dabessa Gemelal, Advocacy for Oromia



PHOTO: Dabessa Gemelal says many Oromo fled Ethiopia due to war and political oppression. (ABC Radio Melbourne: Nicole Mills)

"There is Oromo people in Ethiopia who are subjugated for a long time because of their identity. The people came [to Australia] mainly because of political reasons.

"When people moved from their own land, basically there are a lot of issues: dislocation, identity, family breakdown, trauma from the journeys they came here.

"This group was organised actually to support each other.

"When they come to our office we provide free services in all ranges of community activities.

"Sometimes we organise cultural activities which empower them. It looks like a small [thing] but it is an important ingredient to empower people.

"Ross House is actually good for us ... we are a non-profit organisation based on some small grants from the em and members' donations. We don't have enough money to hire a big city office."

Dr Heidi Nicholl, Emerge Australia



PHOTO: Dr Heidi Nicholl wants more awareness of chronic fatigue syndrome. (ABC Radio Melbourne: Nicole Mills)

"We work with people who have myalgic encephalomyelitis, also known as chronic fatigue syndrome.

"About 25 per cent of people with the condition are so severely unwell that they're housebound or bedbound.

"The stigma for this disease has been very profoundly problematic for the community.

"Historically people have not been believed, they have had problems getting the sympathy they should have, not from family but from medical professionals.

"There's not enough treatments, and then they haven't really had enough hope that things are actually being researched and that people care enough about this to find therapies or a cure."

Beryl Noonan, Melbourne Osteoporosis Support Group



PHOTO: Beryl Noonan says the support group helps people better understand their condition. (ABC Radio Melbourne: Nicole Mills)

"Our purpose is to support members who have osteoporosis.

"Osteoporosis causes the bone to become thin, just like a honeycomb.

"Younger people can develop this condition — it is not a symptom only of an older person.

"I've got osteoporosis and I've had it for over 20 years. They [the group] do a good job because they give you ex information and give you tips and we have speakers.

"The camaraderie is good."

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