

# Rethinking the blueprint to house the homeless



By [Katie McDonald](#)

## PROPERTY

From advertiser to architect, Michelle Blakeley is at the forefront of a new housing solution tackling homelessness.



Michelle Blakeley says My Home helps address some of the biggest barriers to housing the homeless. *Photo: Gabriel Oliveira*

Becoming an architect was a childhood dream for Michelle Blakeley, however that aspiration was put on hold until much later in life.

“I went to an all-girls school and was told ... ‘girls don’t do that sort of thing’,” Ms Blakeley told *Business News*.

“I always wanted to be an architect.

“My father and uncles were in the building industry. I was one of those girls that never played with dolls; I had building blocks.

“Basically, the headmistress said, ‘you have to do something else’.”

After leaving school in 1972 and undertaking a degree in journalism, Ms Blakeley spent more than 20 years in the advertising industry before deciding it was time to pursue her lifelong ambition.

Graduating with an architecture degree in 2005, Ms Blakeley landed an opportunity with industry leader Geoff Warn, who was most recently Western Australia’s government architect (2013-20).

Soon after, Ms Blakeley launched her own studio, building up a portfolio of mostly single-residential and grouped dwellings.

In 2018, Ms Blakeley received the Australian Institute of Architects WA Sustainable Architecture Award for a house in White Gum Valley.

“One of the first houses I designed was to passive house principles (a voluntary building standard for energy efficiency). I found it fascinating,” she said.

“When you see how it can reduce energy costs year in year out, it makes you realise it’s an important part of design.”

That passion for sustainable housing has underpinned Ms Blakeley’s latest venture, “My Home” – a new organisation seeking to provide immediate and longer-term housing solutions for the homeless, or those most at risk of homelessness.

Inspired by an initiative in Melbourne, Ms Blakeley said “My Home” addressed some of the major barriers faced in delivering housing – land affordability, availability and the cost of delivery.

My Home acts a philanthropic housing developer, managing and overseeing the project delivery phase, operating under a public private partnership (PPP) model.

Under this model, the private sector funds projects through tax deductible donations to My Home, or by supplying materials; the community housing provider manages the housing, tenants and support services; and the state government leases vacant land at a peppercorn lease.

Ms Blakeley started designing housing concepts for My Home about three years ago, targeting unused government land close to public transport and established neighbourhoods.



*The My Home prefabricated units. Image: Michelle Blakeley Architect*

A demonstration home was built at Offsite, the fabricator, last year.

“We’re using a prefabricated system, like an Ikea flat pack - the panels for the walls, roof and floor are timber stud,” she said.

“Houses can be erected within three hours ... then the builder steps in for electrical, plumbing and fitout. So it’s very time (and cost) efficient.

“They’re about 30 square metres, with a living room, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom (doubles as a laundry) ... and a ceiling up to three metres high.

“And the cladding and colours can be changed to make them appropriate to the suburb.”

Passive house design principles made the homes even more affordable, Ms Blakeley said, by increasing their energy efficiency, leveraging the winter sun and promoting natural air flow, a water tank acting as an acoustic buffer.

Solar panels double as a veranda roof, with plants and vegetation integrated as a privacy screen.

My Home has three active projects in the pipeline. Land has been earmarked in East Victoria Park, Woodridge and North Fremantle, where construction is expected to start on the group's pilot project early this year.

Highbury Homes has been appointed as builder for the project, which features 18 self-contained single bedroom units on Congdon Street under a 15-year lease.

The land is owned by the Public Transport Authority and is part of a railway reserve, with the lightweight homes facilitating relocation if the land is required for its reserved purpose in the future.

Local community group St Patrick's will support future residents, targeting homeless women aged 55 plus.

Rotary will provide furnishings and homewares.

"My Home" follows Housing First principles – the premise that if a person has permanent and safe housing, there is more of a chance of becoming self-sufficient.

Ms Blakeley said the model had an 80 per cent success rate (in terms of residents not regressing to homelessness), with examples in Finland achieving close to zero homelessness as a result.

"People have an attitude there's a silver bullet that will solve the whole problem - it just doesn't work like that," she said.

"But if you give a person a home, it's easier to get a job than being out on the street. If you don't have a fixed address it's also hard to access support services."

Ms Blakeley said "My Home" was targeting the property sector – developers and builders - for funding.

"The Perth market has served you well and enabled you to be successful, so now is your opportunity to give back," she said.