

Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building, Friday 27 July 2018, 11.00am

Mr Robert Pradolin

Founding Board Member, Housing All Australians

[Click for video of Robert's latest *Housing All Australians* project](#)

Good morning ladies and gentlemen

Firstly, I'd like to say how honoured and humbled I feel, to be asked to speak to you on such a **symbolic day**; your graduation.

In thinking about today, I recalled some of the emotions I felt, and the pride my parents particularly felt, in seeing me, the first of their four children, graduate from university.

I was the only male and the eldest of 4 children. My parents migrated to Australia from Italy in the 1950's, leaving behind a life and culture they knew and loved, never having had the opportunity of any kind of formal education.

As a result, my father was determined that we would all go to university, and he set about making sure we did exactly that.

Education, especially achieving a university degree, was something **he was never able to aspire to**.

He wanted all his children, to have what he considered to be an amazing opportunity, so that we could all live a much better life, than he or mum had had. In **his** view, education provided the **key**.

I remember my father making a statement, that left an indelible impression in my mind.

As a young man in Europe during the Second World War, he knew of many families who had their assets seized by the invading army, and he was always concerned, that one day, it might happen to him or his family.

And even though he migrated to Australia to start a new life in a democratic society, his comment to all of us which **has stuck in my mind**, is that "if one day you lose all your possessions and they take all your assets, the one thing that no one can take away is your education". It is so true.

This is something that has **resonated** with me all my life and now, you too have acquired something, something that no one can take away from you, however hard they try.

So why am I here giving this speech today? Well, I've been working with Melbourne University for several years in an area that I'm very passionate about, which is the provision of housing for all Australians, rich or poor. Professor Julie Wills, Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, and Professor Alan Pert, thought I should share with you what I've been doing, as some of you might find it interesting.

But before I get into that, in contemplating this speech, I looked back over my career and I must say, I found that personal reflection quite revealing.

We're not normally given a reason to reflect on our lives, to see if we can dig up something that we believe is interesting enough to share, because when you live your life, you don't necessarily think that it's very interesting to anyone else.

As you have heard, I am a civil engineer, I have a post graduate diploma in property and an MBA. But what I've never divulged to anyone, is that my **first burning ambition** was to be an architect.

You see, I've always loved building ever since I can remember. Be it building space ships and cubby houses out of wooden boxes in the back yard, through to a career in property development which has spanned land subdivisions, large housing developments all the way through to multi storey commercial/residential precincts like Freshwater Place, in Southbank.

I just love seeing things built and doing it as part of a Team. You see, over time I've come to realise that if you love what you do, you don't actually **work** many days in your life.

As a young man, I was always curious. I asked a lot of questions.

I found myself always stepping into areas outside my comfort zone; wanting to try new things, new ideas without knowing what the outcome was going to be.

And in preparing this speech, I've come to realise that **curiosity** was, and still is, one of the elements that has kept me inspired.

I believe we need to constantly step out of our comfort zone to learn and grow as people.

We need to push ourselves to think differently and keep trying new things. And make mistakes. Make plenty of them. But, use them as learning opportunities.

I have a saying that I use quite often which is, "success is built on a mountain of failures. Just don't make the same one twice"

Too many people today are scared of making mistakes. They want to know the answer before they are willing to ask the question. And that gives rise, in my view, to the current state of play, in terms of political populism. Behave authentically.

Never, and I repeat never, compromise your own personal values for any company or individual. Along with your knowledge, your values are the only things that truly belong to you.

At this stage of my career, I have the luxury of deciding to work with people that I want to work with. Who share the same values as me. It makes my life much more enjoyable. So, when you select an employer or create your own business, focus on the values and culture of the organisation and make sure they are compatible with yours. I also held the view, and still do, that nothing is impossible. If you really want to do something, if you really believe in something, you can always find a way to make it happen.

And this brings me to what I suspect both Julie and Alan wanted me to share with you today. During my role as General Manager, I was responsible for the development of 3 significant projects on public land which started my involvement with **social and affordable housing**. Through the years I engaged myself with Melbourne University and their work in the housing space, specifically on programmes such as Transforming Housing and The Housing Expo.

As part of this work, international experts would come over and talk to us about the development of their cities. At the time, I was also reading a number of publications discussing the economic impact and benefits to the economy, of well-located affordable housing.

I distinctly remember the moment, when a financier from New York, called Marc Jahr, delivered a presentation putting forward the view that affordable housing was considered to be key infrastructure for New York. That was my light bulb moment.

From that point on, I realised that this was not just housing we were talking about. It was economic infrastructure for our city. Just like roads, schools or hospitals.

And when you take a moment to really think about this from a human perspective, how can anyone get their life in order and be productive to a society, if they do not have stable shelter?

I have consequently formed a very clear and unambiguous view, that unless we invest in more housing for all Australians, rich or poor, the long-term costs and economic consequences for our future will be huge. And you and your children, will be the ones paying for it.

A lack of stable and affordable housing will result in unintended consequences that will spill over into the areas of mental health, family violence, police intervention, the justice system and create a dependency on long-term welfare.

The problem is becoming so big to solve, that it scares every government. And guess what? They do nothing. So what happens? The problem gets bigger.

My generation is leaving you an intergenerational time bomb.

So as silly and as daunting as it sounds, I've put together a single page strategy on how we can try and change that. How we can start to change that paradigm.

I have titled it, very simply, "Housing all Australians".

It's clear focus and objective is already resonating with a number of corporates and institutions including Melbourne University, which is part of the reason, I suspect, why I'm probably here today.

I believe that we've gone past waiting for **governments** to do the things that we see are so obvious and make common sense.

If we want things to change, **then it's up to us to make that happen.**

Now, let me come back to the "nothing is impossible" belief I mentioned earlier.

One of the 4 pillars of the strategy, started off as a discussion with my daughter.

We were having coffee at a café in Degraeves street, just off Flinders street. It was the time when the Grand Hall above Flinders Street station was in the news, because it had been vacant for over 10 years.

As we were sitting there chatting, a homeless person came up and asked for some money, so he could get a bed for the night. For various reasons I don't normally give money, but on that particular night, we did.

I said to my daughter, "I can't believe that above the iconic symbol of Melbourne, which is Flinders Street Station, is a grand hall which has been empty for so long, and beneath it, people are sleeping rough on the streets. It just did not make sense. I said to her "I wonder how many other buildings are empty in Melbourne and that could be used to provide shelter?".

That was over 2 years ago.

And with persistence, and some very generous companies and individuals, exactly one week ago today, to the hour in fact, the Minister for Housing and the Governor of Victoria opened Melbourne's first pop-up shelter in a building in South Melbourne. It had already been empty for two years and would have probably have stayed empty for 5 – 6 years before being redeveloped.

This building is now managed by the YWCA and is housing homeless women over the age of 55. Another pop-up shelter was launched three weeks ago in Sydney by the Uniting Church, in a building that was going to be empty for several years. And it too, is housing homeless women over 55 years of age.

Given this is transitional housing, we estimate that will be able to house in excess of 150 to 200 homeless women over the period of time that the buildings would normally have been vacant.

And that is in only 2 buildings.

I think there are 1000's of empty buildings across Australia.

The sad part of all that, is that women over the age of 55, are the largest growing cohort of homeless people in Australia. Just think about that.

The opening of our first pop-up shelter was a very satisfying day, and yet very humbling day. It made me realise, and I want you to realise, that as an individual, you [actually can make a difference in this world, if you believe in something, and if you have the persistence to see it through.](#)

In closing, I would like to wish you **every success** for your future.

But..... I want you to not underestimate the gift of education. I want you to step outside your comfort zone and explore what the world has to offer.

Make it your mission to try new and different things and don't be worried about making mistakes.

Ask questions..... Be curious..... Never underestimate your capacity to inspire others and through that, change the world for the better.

But to do that, you must first find your passion, and if you're as lucky as me, you too might not have to **actually work** many days in your life!

And if I can leave you with some words of action from an Irish poet named W.B. Yeats: 'Do not wait to strike till the iron is hot,but make it hot by striking'.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

This morning we are fortunate to have as guest speaker a significant figure in the housing industry, Mr Robert Pradolin.

Robert is an engineer by background. He graduated with Honors from Monash University, and later earned a post graduate diploma in Property from RMIT and an MBA from Mt Eliza Management College.

He has been active in the property industry for over 30 years, most recently as General Manager of Frasers Property Australia (formally Australand).

Robert has a keen interest in the development of all housing types and in particular, a focus on housing affordability. Indeed a proud achievement of his time with Australand/Frasers was steering the company into the social and affordable housing space.

Robert believes that the principle "housing for all – rich and poor" reflects both a fundamental human need and the best long-term interest of the economy.

Robert has extensive relationships within the property industry. Among many industry bodies he has been involved with, he is currently on the Board of Salvation Army Housing (Vic), the Property Industry Foundation and the Housing Industry Association in Victoria.

He is also a past Board member of the Property Council of Australia, Livable Housing Australia, and the Heritage Council of Victoria.

He is also involved with housing research and policy development with the University of Melbourne.

It is a pleasure to ask him to address us today. Please welcome Mr Robert Pradolin.