

THE VALUE OF ARCHITECTURE FOR SENIORS LIVING

Does competitive tendering for architects' services really give seniors living developments the best design outcome and value for their project, or is it just a competition to see who can offer the cheapest fees?

"Price is what you pay, value is what you get" Warren Buffett

It is an exceptional opportunity to build a new building and it is not an endeavour to be taken lightly. From the outset there is a responsibility to fully realise the opportunity and to bring quality and excellence to the built environment. The alternative is to waste the opportunity and produce a mediocre building with little design finesse beyond a decorative façade and inefficient floorplans.

Building is continually increasing in complexity: Evolution of state planning instruments, advances in building technology, heightened awareness of issues of such as energy and combustibility along with an uptick in scrutiny of building design and construction (think Design and Building Practitioners Act in NSW) are all contributing to increased demands on the design team.

Senior's housing is often for vulnerable communities and often for operators that have limited resources. This type of development requires care, knowledge, time, and expertise from its consultant team to be successful and to meet the expectations of stakeholders.

Responding to request for tender documents (RFTs) for architectural project work is time consuming and can often involve several weeks of unpaid work. The tendered fees may cover an extensive time period (of many years) and may be expected to include contingencies difficult to anticipate at the time of tender. Tender submissions are often put together with considerable research, care, a fair bit of passion and... hope.

But ultimately, is tendering just a way to get cheap fees? And how does the cheapest fee represent value?

The problem with cheap fees is that the consultant teams either need to spend fewer hours on the project, get junior and less experienced staff to do the work, or ask their senior staff work overtime without pay. The Australian Research Council has recently funded research into wellbeing in architecture, in response to reported increasing levels of stress in the profession. A strong outcome from the research is that a major cause of stress and disillusionment is due to external demand for ever-increasing services for an ever-diminishing fee. In many RFTs, consultants are asked to confirm that their practice conforms to standards that guard against slavery (Modern Slavery Act 2018), which they do. The irony being that those same consultants are often encouraging staff work overtime without pay.

The hidden costs of cheap fees are burnout, stress, ill health and poor quality.

It is fair to say that some responsibility for this problem comes from within the profession, where architects appear to be happy to 'race to the bottom' by offering ever-diminishing fees. The 'race to the bottom' paradigm needs to be reversed to a 'race to excellence' where appropriate fees allow for good quality design and documentation, and up-skilling of employees to meet ever-increasing demands of the built environment.

If a prospective developer had to choose their client without a fee proposal, how would it affect their choice?

Architects who are valued fairly by their clients will be motivated to service their client well. They will also be more inclined to 'go the extra mile' when an opportunity arises during the project (as it often does) to enhance or improve the outcome.

"The bitterness of poor quality remains long after the sweetness of a low price is forgotten" Benjamin Franklin