

50 Albert Road, South Melbourne

Approaching 13,000
Area – 2.5 km ²
Median age – 37 years

1. 50 Albert Road
2. Melbourne CBD
3. St Kilda Road
4. Albert Park Lake
5. Arts Centre Melbourne
6. Flinders Street Station

The 50 Albert approach

Residents at 50 Albert seem to have it all. Their building looks amazing, its financial performance is brilliant and the social life on offer is outstanding.

Up close & personal



Good news tends to travel and so it did with 50 Albert, a beautiful residential tower tucked on a side street, directly off St Kilda Road, Melbourne’s major boulevard. A couple of interesting stories were making the rounds. One involved the building’s participation in the Open House Melbourne program – with the residents and the architects proudly hosting tours – the second was that a handful of residents were teaching each other how to speak Chinese. There was also talk that the building was performing well financially, better than contemporaries around town. *The Place Economy* wondered why.

50 Albert was completed in 2013. It stands at 31 storeys and comprises 283 apartments. Around 600 people call it home. The building has a white porcelain exterior that, as the architects at Elenberg Fraser describe it, “rolls” into a hotel-style lobby. Design influence came from Japan, inspiring the cherry tree art piece that brings a pretty pink blush to the entry.

The place is striking, no doubt, with the additional charm of a snow white 19th century building on the ground plane so The Kettle Black café can serve up gourmet fare. The building’s interiors and communal spaces are particularly striking. There are artworks in the lobby and a sleek suite of groundfloor wellness rooms in addition to a gym and spa. The rooftop is an indisputable gem. Views of Albert Park Lake, home to Melbourne’s Grand Prix circuit, must be among the best the city has to offer and, yet, does this explain why 50 Albert is so intensely admired?

The fact is that Melbourne now boasts many beautiful structures and Elenberg Fraser is responsible for more than its fair share of them. With 50 Albert, however, it is the place’s deeply woven community bonds you hear most often talked about, surpassing discussion of its reptillian-like façade or even the rooftop hot tub.

Neil Brown is the building manager and a resident of 50 Albert. As chief executive officer of Henderson Brown Facilities Management, he purchased his apartment two years after the the lift doors had officially opened. In that time he has witnessed some major changes.



01 PAGE 357
A BEAUTIFUL, RESIDENTIAL TOWER TUCKED ON A SIDE STREET, DIRECTLY OFF MELBOURNE'S ST KILDA ROAD.

02
THE FIRST FRIDAY OF EVERY MONTH SEES MOST RESIDENTS GETTING TOGETHER FOR '50 ALBERT LOUNGE.'

“I think the building started off with around 19 per cent owner occupiers, now that figure is closer to 67 per cent,” he explains. “We have a broad range of age groups and nationalities among the residents. The youngest is around 17, the oldest 92.”

Under Neil’s stewardship, assisted by facilities management guidelines put together by the developer, Hamton, and the team at Elenberg Fraser, community relations within 50 Albert are flourishing. The supper club he began for people who liked to dine and try new Melbourne restaurants is a victim of its own success. Neil now struggles to find venues big enough to accommodate the 60 to 70 people wishing to come along every second month.

The first Friday of every month sees most residents getting together for ‘50 Albert Lounge’ – regular drinks and nibbles where everyone gets to know each other, organise social events or just hang out.

Each Monday night you can wander up to the rooftop with a glass of wine or cup of tea and listen to members of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra perform for free. They happen to live at 50 Albert and use the space for rehearsals, saving the ears of immediate neighbours. In return they play at a couple of official building events throughout the year.

“I think one of the big things that sets this building apart and helps build community is the fact that the roof is not swallowed up by one individual owner’s penthouse,” says Neil. “We all have access to it. It doesn’t matter where your apartment is or how big it is, everyone is entitled up here, everyone is welcome.”

This must be music to the ears of the developer, Hamton. As the company’s Managing Director, Matt Malseed, explains, a liberated rooftop was one of the original team’s “earliest intentions” when working on 50 Albert.

“The rooftop was a key differentiator,” says Matt. “Although many investor purchasers bought apartments, we designed this (as we do all our projects) with the occupant in mind. By offering an appealing place to occupy, whether as an owner or a tenant, the result is ➤

an investment that is sure to rent faster and for more than otherwise.”

Matt says the rooftop ticked some practical boxes too, offering somewhere for spacious dining and entertaining for the smaller apartments. The innovation was also directed at downsizers. “These days it’s more common but 50 Albert was at the forefront of apartments being amalgamated for empty nesters. The quality was there, but these purchasers also wanted more space. That’s another reason why Hamton was very accommodating to requests that we make these customised apartments.

“The building started off with around 19 per cent owner occupiers, now that figure is closer to 67 per cent.”

Neil Brown, Henderson Brown Facilities Management

Again, this is more common now but in 2011 it was relatively rare.”

As it stands, 50 Albert’s calendar of rooftop events covers everything from New Year’s Eve to the annual Christmas Party, a Melbourne Cup event, the building’s birthday, Sunday afternoon jazz sessions, Chinese New Year, an Easter event, a get together for Australia Day, karaoke and games nights, even a function tacked on to the twice-yearly fire evacuation drills. On average, 140 people attend each event; you need a social secretary just to live here.

“We try to tailor activities and events to people’s interests,” Neil explains. “When people move in they get a welcome pack and one of the questions we ask is, ‘What are your interests?’ We have a gardening committee, a book club, walking and cycling groups. Some residents have also started running Mandarin classes so English-speaking neighbours can learn the language. Often if someone has a specific interest or wishes to get something going they will lead the charge. We just add the information to our building emails and it goes from there.”

Neil loves an official event and his entrepreneurial skills help bankroll some of 50 Albert’s most audacious plans. The rooftop, with its sweeping views and stylish furnishings, is the ideal spot for the Red Bull Racing Formula One Team to hire during Melbourne’s Grand Prix. It is also popular with TV crews willing to pay money for the best vantage point. Each time a corporate client hands over cash to use the space the residents at 50 Albert profit, with funds going into facilities upkeep as well as supplies for their own exclusive gatherings. Annual body corporate fees have remained stable for three years running.

The building manager is savvy in other ways too. When he discovered some of 50 Albert’s cohort loved apartment life but missed their gardening chores he had an idea: say goodbye to the landscape company servicing 50 Albert and let the resident green thumbs take over. Now the body corporate saves money, confident that the new team’s pride in their own home ensures quality work.

Things that bring people together with a common goal are popular with Neil. Every Christmas he organises for a ‘wishing tree’ to be set up in the lobby. Hundreds of gifts are gathered and delivered to charities such as Foster Care Victoria and the Salvation Army.

“I think it’s important to build this sense of community because you have a number of people moving into city apartments who might not have a lot of support networks around them. Perhaps they’re downsizing from the suburbs so they’re away from services as well as family and friends, maybe



they’re international students or they’re corporates who have moved here for work. We’re actually finding ways for them to become friends as well as neighbours.”

He also ensures 50 Albert has a permanent, dedicated cleaning team so residents see the same faces around the building day to day. “When one of the cleaning staff had a baby, we posted a photo on the building’s Facebook page and got 800 hits,” he says. “We’re trying to provide residents with hotel service in an apartment building. This means things like dropping your washing, ironing, dry cleaning off at concierge in the morning, then receiving a text to say it’s back in your locker and ready to be picked up.”

The sense that 50 Albert has a genuine and familiar ‘team’ behind it is a hallmark that sets it apart. As Matt Malseed says, this was also embedded in Hamton’s earliest plans.

“We developed the Fifty Albert Lifestyle Team which was pretty uncommon back then,” he explains. “This comprised a range of specialists from different areas. We agreed to give them access to some of the purpose-designed spaces within the building so they could offer services to residents on a user-pays basis. For example, a masseuse offers massages in the therapy room while a personal trainer is available in the gym. Creating spaces that didn’t add significantly to Owners Corporation Fees was a big consideration for us.”

This works well for Neil who also sees relationships as the secret to success, even when it comes to building maintenance. As he explains, “The builder of 50 Albert was Hickory. The building won a lot of awards, including the 2013 UDIA’s (Victoria) Award for Excellence in high density development, so it’s a great calling card. Hickory regularly brings clients through to see the place and we welcome them. And the moment there is an issue, someone is here and it’s fixed. Easy!”

Cards also play a role for the residents. “We have 50 Albert business cards so you can have the building’s name and brand on the front and your individual contact details on the back. People love that. They’re proud to be part of this brand,” says Neil. — ●



In conversation with Callum Fraser, Director, Elenberg Fraser

The role of the architect

“Architecture is really about creating environments, in all of their manifestations.”



Elenberg Fraser had a very close working relationship with the developer, Hamton, on this project. How did that influence the final outcome?

I think such a close relationship gave us a new understanding of the developer’s ambitions and gave Hamton a new understanding of what was possible. For example, they had a permit that contemplated the retention of a small heritage building on site. We saw this as crucial. Retaining it meant we could create a little village feel on the ground floor.

We took the spaces at the back of the building, over the car park entry ramp, and turned them into a wellness centre and yoga room, based on my observations that gyms and tennis courts in apartment buildings are increasingly not used. Freeing up the rooftop was our next goal.

Once we began investigating Hamton’s ambitions we realised they were after more of a management structure than

anything else. Elenberg Fraser worked on the facility management rules, establishing a series of obligations. For instance, the manager had to run a social committee and organise wine and cheese nights every month. They had to do a few things, all designed specifically to encourage people in the building to get to know each other.

Is it usual for architects get involved in that level of detail?

That question reflects a common and very outdated prejudice that architects are only about drawing. Architecture is really about creating environments, in all of their manifestations. That’s one of the reasons Elenberg Fraser has 20 coders sitting in Vietnam making applets that administer our buildings – making it easier for everyone to move around and live in them.

Despite the fact that 50 Albert sold very well, the developer still wasn’t satisfied with how it was evolving culturally. Indeed,

Elenberg Fraser continued to play a key role. How did that unfold?

I think the project sold into the market with something like 80 per cent going to investors. Twenty per cent went to owner occupiers who exercised some consolidations because they recognised the location and because Hamton had a kind of internal sales arms that allowed them to make some retail sales.

Most apartment sales in the commercial residential industry end up going to investors now because developers no longer have these internal sales arms. They have all externalised and the business model for commercial residential sales involves unloading stock to investors as quickly as possible, then passing on the cost of low sales to the developers. Buildings get primarily owned by investors and rented out. That’s pretty much what we’ve come to know about apartment models.

At 50 Albert, an interesting thing happened. Hamton ran their business

management and leasing arm on site for the first year but the building was not what it should have been. Eventually they made some changes and Neil Brown from Henderson Brown took on the role of building manager. He came to see us in order to understand how things were supposed to work and we simply referred him back to the original obligations. He immediately understood better than anyone that his job was to get people in the building to know each other so they would start self-organising and taking care of the place in a better way.

Which initiatives at 50 Albert do you feel had the most impact early on in terms of nurturing community spirit or neighbourly bonds?

The lobby of 50 Albert has a big bench within a lovely reception area, a lot like a hotel. Now normally the manager of an apartment building sits in a back room; no one can find them, you have to go down a corridor and knock on a door. At 50 Albert the rules stipulate that



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THE ROOFTOP HOSTS A HEADY CALENDAR OF ANNUAL EVENTS.

04
THE LOBBY OF 50 ALBERT HAS A BIG BENCH WITHIN A LOVELY RECEPTION AREA, A LOT LIKE A HOTEL.

the manager must sit in the lobby with the second in charge beside him. These warm bodies start to have a permanent presence out front. People are coming and going. You’re getting to know the faces, you’re saying hello. These are just the simple things about belonging to a community – being known by name and not being anonymous.

After six months of just doing that, people started to get to know each other, they started to enjoy it. The renters got to know the owners and vice versa. Neil then went on to really extend that with a series of off-site activities where residents would go out and do things together.

He also ran the monthly wine and cheese nights in the bar space located within the lobby. Once again, after a six-month period, something really interesting happened. The common area cleaning bills started to plummet and the security costs in the building went down. The building was in better shape for less work because people were looking after it like

it was a home. Slowly, the proportion of investors to owner-occupiers started to change. Now at 50 Albert the ratio has almost reversed.

How important is the resident mix in a building like this?

It’s good to have renters, you want that kind of mix. I think part of the attraction of 50 Albert lies in the fact that it’s not occupied by just one class of people, it has diversity. Go up to the rooftop on a sunny day and you’ll see a grandmother sitting on one of the sunbeds reading a book while half a dozen tattooed boys are in the hot tub and a gaggle of girls sit nearby drinking Coronas. There might be 10 different groups of people up there on a weekend afternoon, happily existing side by side. That’s how you end up with situations like the one at 50 Albert where one group of residents starts teaching another how to speak Chinese. All we are talking about here is the simple interaction between people from different positions in life, with different perspectives, actually enjoying each

other’s company. That’s the great success of 50 Albert!

50 Albert was the first project where Elenberg Fraser put the facilities in place and then measured the outcomes. Tell us about that?

One of our staff members attended the body corporate meetings, the social committee meetings and even the wine and cheese nights. I went to a few as well. By simply talking to people and being a part of things we really got to know how the facilities were working. We even had our office party on the rooftop.

As a facility, 50 Albert’s rooftop is owned by the owner’s corporation and can be rented out in a commercial way to produce income for the body corporate. This offsets cleaning costs and common-area power costs. In essence, the building has its own assets which the owners collectively share in. They run these to a commercial plan which helps mitigate their ongoing obligations. This is how

“These are just the simple things about belonging to a community – being known by name and not being anonymous.”

we see things going in the future... facilities that function in a secure and independent way to benefit the owners while also producing revenue streams that drive down body corporate costs.

Councils don’t have excess money through rates anymore. We’re not seeing the same building programs for libraries and community spaces and so forth that we did 20 years ago. As populations ➡

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densify and you get a lot more people living in one area, you need to provide adequate community spaces. Local councils can no longer afford them; they’re hard pressed maintaining the existing facilities.

Our program sees developers producing the community spaces themselves, within the building. This does two things: it brings the immediate residents together but it also brings their friends and contacts into the building as well. This enhances the outreach, the embedding if you like, within the broader community. To me this is actually the critical issue. It’s what you might call place but we simply call the right to belong.

Does 50 Albert herald a change in apartment living culture?

If you live in a suburban court with half a dozen neighbours you like to know the people around you – who they are, where they come from, what their story is. People have never really found a way to do that within apartment complexes. We’ve managed to achieve that; the same level of safety and belonging you feel in

a traditional suburban setting. The people at 50 Albert, however, also get the direct proximity advantages that come from their location as well as all the facilities that turn their apartments into massive houses in effect.

At the end of the day the poker room, private dining room, theatre or yoga room are all just other elements you might have in your house, ones that you share with other household members. At 50 Albert you have these too and you can lock them off for solo access. You can arrange to hive off part of the rooftop, for example, and use the private dining room, the outdoor barbecue area or the spa to hold your birthday party on a Friday night. You invite your guests, some of whom may be from within the building (this does happen by the way), and your friendship group grows - often to include fellow residents.

People are socialising in the place they live, they’re doing it in their daily life and don’t have to go out to bars and restaurants. In the increasingly isolated and ostracised world we live in this has a lot of benefits. Your home becomes a kind of

manufacturing place for your relationships. It fosters your idea of belonging while also giving you more freedom to be yourself.

What makes these changes so important to you?

Ideas like the freedom to be yourself and the safety to belong are not things to be trivialised or turned into catchphrases. I see them as the fundamental identity-building tools that will be critical to the future of apartment building living. Our practice takes them very seriously and I think we’re getting really good at dealing with them.

As buildings begin to house larger numbers of apartments, we are expanding the suite of community spaces we include in each one. Scaling up in a way that maintains the glue to bind these larger communities is getting exponentially harder. You need more and more active techniques that actually facilitate community at that level. This is why we’re now building applets through which each building is administered. This marks a really interesting change in the role of the architect.

Can technology help build stronger apartment-based communities?

Think about your life today. How many elements do you relate to via your phone? Almost everything, right? To date the only thing missing has been your house. The built environment has been backward in its use and application of technology in that way.

Products like Apple Home and Google Home are now facilitating the broader application of technology into the built environment. It hasn’t worked before because buildings were made out of ‘dumb’ things like metal, concrete and glass. The next generation of lights and washing machines and so forth are all micro-chipped, all part of internet of things.

Our applets allow you to reserve community spaces independently or see what’s happening in the building in terms of activities. Down the track you’ll also be able to see where your friends are in the building, if they choose to make that information public. ➡



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06
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07 PAGE 369
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“Your home becomes a kind of manufacturing place for your relationships. It fosters your idea of belonging while also giving you more freedom to be yourself.”

All this is driving a new way to engage with our built environments. It's where architecture starts bringing your home and your phone together. You can do single-point-click replacement of your lights or single-point-click booking of a massage or a Sunday morning yoga class. There is no more going downstairs, filling out a form, handing over money. You can scroll through the choices, click, and away you go. Payment is made through your Apple Wallet or similar. It's easy!

The other advantage is that it's all pay-for-use. Developers used to resist building new community spaces by using the argument that people wouldn't pay the extra body corporate costs. What is evidenced at 50 Albert is that if you build them properly they're revenue centres for the building, not cost centres. 50 Albert's building managers, Henderson Brown, also continued to work into the model to get more equity and fairness into the system. The internet of things helps them as well, allowing the maintenance regime

to be handled through the application, leaving more time for the building manager to take care of community issues. We're getting better at automating the mechanical functions of buildings and, while it's still a work-in-progress, the next revolution of building parts or materials will improve that further.

50 Albert's social story is so positive. Can the same be said for its financial story?

I think what you're seeing now is more people trying to buy into 50 Albert than there are apartments available. We've been tracking the capital growth of that building against a neighbouring building, which is highly comparable but has an anonymous culture. The neighbour has had zero capital growth, 50 Albert has had great capital growth. And here is the learning: if you get the community right and you create a place where people want to be then you also create demand for the product and this means your asset increases in value.

It's interesting because for many years capital growth wasn't a high priority for apartment purchasers. They used residential investments as a way to mitigate their tax obligations. 50 Albert puts capital growth back into the profile for residential investment purchases which is correct to my mind. They should have this advantage because when someone buys off a plan, they're essentially taking a risk on what the building is going to be like. They should get the pay-off in capital growth that comes between their purchase price and the price an incoming resident population is willing to pay.

Now we can present a very clear model to our developers: build a great building, foster a great community and your investors will be rewarded with capital growth. They'll also come back to your next project and the next project after that. — ●

“This is how we see things going in the future... facilities that function in a secure and independent way to benefit the owners while also producing revenue streams that drive down body corporate costs.”

*Callum Fraser
Director, Elenberg Fraser*



Meet Jose Agudelo Quiroga

A resident's perspective

Before Jose Agudelo Quiroga lived at 50 Albert, he worked on it. Elenberg Fraser employed him to perform post-occupancy evaluations on most of the properties the company designed. “The intent was to identify how Elenberg Fraser could improve on the liveability of its buildings. We did this not only from observing but also through direct conversations with tenants and facilities managers,” Jose explains.

On the personal front, Jose was planning to start a new family so was looking around for somewhere to live that offered enough room for three people, with access to services without too much travel.

“Location is obviously important and naturally 50 Albert has that to offer,” he explains. “Since I had the opportunity to review many buildings, I gradually attained a level of understanding as to what works and what needs to be improved. Thus it was relatively easy for me to choose from those I had seen.”

He thinks branding is actually something that 50 Albert got right, even though it may not have been the

intention of the developer. “I believe this initiative was more the architect’s doing,” he says. “The fact that Elenberg Fraser chose to stay close to the project post-construction has been an important factor in its success, owning both the successes and shortfalls.”

Jose says Elenberg Fraser “quickly understood that people look at labels, even in construction” and, while the architect may not be able to control the quality of the build, it can ensure the design keeps the occupants in mind and works to achieve that.

“Elenberg Fraser worked with the post-construction managers to ensure the building could fulfil its intent,” he says. “Unless they are just passing through, other developers need to take this into consideration as well. The right architectural design, along with greater input during the building stage, means the design concept and quality of work can remain high. It can also ensure the correct building managers are eventually put in place – once again maintaining that intent.”

Jose says 50 Albert also lives up to the definition of the vertical village. “You may not be able to physically provide everything a group needs to live, but what you do provide should be done well. I think this is certainly the case with the current facilities manager, Henderson Brown. They’ve created a sense of belonging for all the building’s occupants.”

And, according to Jose, these kind of community and cultural strengths can be achieved in older buildings, maybe even into affordable housing communities.

“Currently, with some of the technology available, it is much easier to bring an old building into the new era; the secret is communication and having the right tools in place can facilitate this,” he explains. “One essential tool is the person behind the initiative! So again, the facilities manager is key.”

Jose believes the cultural, commercial and social benefits of a place like 50 Albert are tangible on a number of levels. “Part of creating a safe environment is

“The fact that Elenberg Fraser chose to stay close to the project post-construction has been an important factor in its success, owning both the successes and shortfalls.”

Jose Agudelo Quiroga, resident

the creation of community and a sense of belonging. This in turn keeps the value of properties stable, often making them more worthwhile investments should you choose to move on. I think the potential for apartment living to be a worthwhile investment is achievable in most Victorian neighbourhoods with this approach.” — ●



THE RESIDENTS

Getting to know you. The Place Economy joins residents for the monthly rooftop gathering.



Resident, Gavin (on right), and his pal, Frederick, enjoy a beer and a laugh at Friday night drinks after a hard week of hedge fund analysing and recruiting for the banking industry respectively.



Worrying about your children and wanting to feel confident about their home life doesn't end when they turn 18. Pete and his family attended 50 Albert's monthly drinks to meet his daughter's new neighbours and check out her digs.



50 Albert's rooftop is the ideal place to bring a friend for drinks. Madeleine, an engineer originally from Brisbane, enjoys sharing her incredible home with a pal at the Friday night get-together.



Some of the members of 50 Albert's cohort who love apartment life but miss their gardening chores. These resident green thumbs took over maintenance of the building's greenery from contractors, saving money for the body corporate.



Neil Brown (centre) is building manager and resident. He enjoys a drink with John (left) and David (right), both retirees who love their new 50 Albert 'lock up and go' lifestyle after years in larger family homes.



Jose Agudelo Quiroga, pictured here with fellow resident, Danielle, once worked for the architects, Elenberg Fraser, so he understood the appeal of 50 Albert more than most. He believes strong community building can keep property values stable.



Poonan (left) hosts her friend Peter for Friday drinks. The insurance broker for a superannuation company rented an apartment at 50 Albert for three years and enjoyed the lifestyle and community so much she decided to buy.



Part of Ingrid's (centre) 70th birthday celebrations involved gathering family and friends on the rooftop for Friday drinks. A practicing psychologist and relationship therapist, she calls herself the "keeper of the city pad" and says 50 Albert represents "the new way of living".

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CHAPTER 6
No place too small

Up close & personal
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