

# The Government Employees' Housing Authority (GEHA)

1965-2006

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CEED Partner: The Government Employees' Housing Authority

## Abstract

*Enacted by the Government Employees' Housing Act of 1964 (the Act) the Government Employees' Housing Authority (GEHA) was proclaimed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1965. For the following forty-two years, GEHA continued to operate under its own legislation. In 2005 its fortieth year, GEHA provided accommodation for 60 Government Agencies in over 250 locations throughout regional Western Australia. What were the factors leading to the formation of GEHA and how has the Authority evolved over the past forty-two years?*

## 1.0 Introduction: Why GEHA?

The year was 1964 and Western Australia was on the verge of a Resource boom. With low unemployment rates and a prospering economy, the State was exiting the post-war period with hope and determination. Yet in the fifteen years following World War Two, Australia had experienced its most severe housing shortage since Federation [Paris 1991]. The post-war 'baby boom' significantly increased the amount of dwellings required. However material and labour shortages severely restricted construction. Population growth, especially in the North of the State due to the rapidly expanding mining industry, put significant pressure on the rural housing sector. This population growth demanded more Government employees, needed to support blossoming regional and remote communities.

The creation of GEHA came about through several different factors. Essentially the Government Employees' Housing Act was implemented to cure an acute housing shortage, as the need for Government employees in country areas grew rapidly with the mining industry. The fragmented approach to Government employee housing that existed throughout the 1950s was no longer adequate. As the Government Employees' Housing Scheme (the precursor to GEHA) struggled to cope with demand, standards began to fall. Further departmental intervention in the housing sector only exacerbated the situation. Erratic standards and rentals coupled with the high cost of living in remote locations, did little to entice Government employees to the areas where they were most needed.

By creating a single Authority for the purpose of Government employee housing, the Government hoped to circularise housing provision and introduce a set of uniform policies and standards. By improving general housing conditions and easing the financial burden through subsidised accommodation, it was hoped that the newly formed Authority would make the prospect of a

country posting more appealing to Government employees. A 'build over buy' policy was adopted from the outset to promote growth and development within the building sector.

Government intervention into the provision of Government employee housing was not a new phenomenon in Western Australia. Yet whilst intervention had been attempted under the Government Employees' Housing Scheme, the creation of an Authority for the purpose of housing the State's Government employees represented a significant shift. GEHA was an Authority like no other, Western Australia being the first State to circularise Government employee housing. The move to introduce a set of uniform policies and standards into the Government employee housing sphere was both a progressive and innovative response to the housing shortage, fostering the growth and development of Western Australia.

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## 2.0 GEHA: A Government Agency

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Government always plays a significant role in the housing sector, either through direct intervention or indirectly through housing policy [McGuire 1981]. Policy making is a highly political and ideological process. Within the Public Housing sector these tensions are magnified and housing policy becomes an ideological battlefield. Resulting policies offer valuable insight into the social, political and economic framework of society as a whole.

Where then, is GEHA located in the housing sector? GEHA as a Government Agency providing housing for Government employees' occupies a unique role. Whilst influenced by wider trends in the public housing sector, GEHA policy remains distinct from the welfare system. As a non-profit Government Agency, GEHA provides subsidised accommodation. As stipulated under the original Government Employees' Housing Act of 1964, the burden of construction and maintenance costs fell entirely upon GEHA [The Act 1964]. Housing is one of the largest commodities in Capitalist society. However it is also one of the most expensive [Berry 1979]. The economic implications of GEHA's role to obtain, maintain and upgrade housing stock exacted a severe financial toll upon the organisation.

Yet whilst the economic implications experienced by GEHA are similar to that experienced by the Public Housing sector as a whole, GEHA is in a unique position. The Authority houses a specific part of the labour force by providing a service exclusive to Government professionals. Thus GEHA must provide the framework for the reproduction of labour. This places additional pressures upon GEHA as a specialist Government organisation. The standard of housing provided must be comparable to housing provided in the private housing sector and adequately reflect the 'status' of Government employees within the community. As a potential indicator of status, housing has a direct relationship to the well-being of workers and thus directly affects the standard of work produced by the housed labour force [ibid.]. The consistent rise in expected standards of living by society as a whole, are reflected in changing GEHA policy.

Yet the policy of increased housing standards is not without its problems. Under the GEHA Act the Authority was responsible for financing the maintenance and upgrading carried out. With an extensive housing stock spanning throughout regional and rural Western Australia, maintenance problems were inevitable. With a high turnover rate, tenant dissatisfaction was significant. An acute shortage of skilled tradesmen in rural areas exacerbated the problem and the Authority struggled to find an economically viable solution.

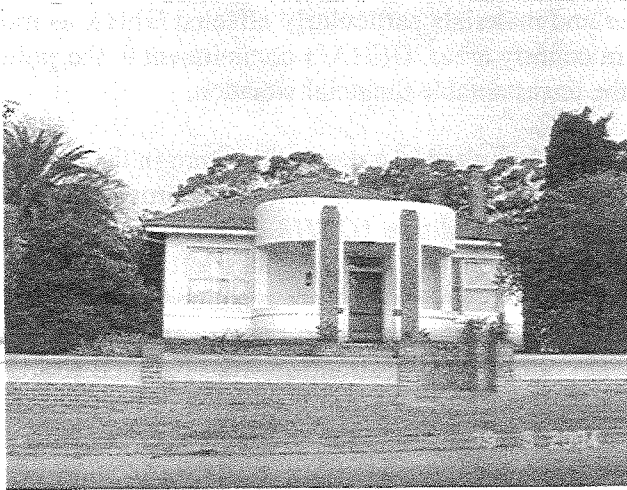
Construction formed the cornerstone of GEHA policy for many years. However as early as 1970 the first signs of strain in the construction program were beginning to show. The rapid escalation in building costs and State-wide shortage of labour and materials particularly affected GEHA as most of the Authority's building activity took place in country areas. GEHA's commitment to the policy of 'build over buy' contributed significantly to the unsustainable financial situation.

In 1981 the development of the North/West Gas Shelf resulted in a dramatic upturn in the need for accommodation in the region [Stewart 2006]. Campaigns by Unions for improved housing conditions contributed significantly to increases in expenditure [*GEHA Annual Report 1987*]. Substantial borrowing throughout the 1980s at a time of high interest rates left GEHA with a crippling accumulated debt. From numerous reviews it was obvious there remained a need for the Government to supply appropriate levels of service and infrastructure to country areas [*Review of GEHA 1994*]. However "alternative procurement policies" to construction were required [ibid. p. 14]. Key objectives included the reduction of housing stock to the minimum level compatible with needs and the utilisation of private sector rental and leased accommodation [ibid.]. GEHA's mission was revised, emphasising that "the Authority is not in the primary business of supplying accommodation" [ibid. p.14]. Departments were made accountable for the costs associated with providing accommodation, including meeting market rents. Construction was restricted to areas without a viable public sector and a general shift towards lease and management was implemented [ibid.]. Leasing offered greater flexibility with the benefits of private sector efficiencies in design and construction.

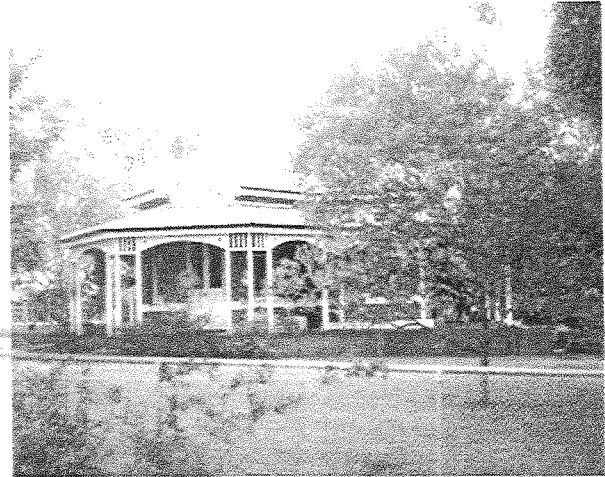
In 1996 GEHA became a commercial organisation, operating as a business unit [*GEHA Annual Reports 1996*]. The 'New Direction' for GEHA included the establishment of a leasing policy to complement ownership, resulting in the provision of a much higher standard of housing. [ibid.]. The Sale and Leaseback and Safe As Houses programmes implemented in 1996 encouraged property owners to build and lease or lease out existing properties to the Authority [ibid.]. These programmes aimed to decrease GEHA owned properties and increase long term lease properties in locations where a viable market existed. The leased accommodation was required to comply with GEHA standards and thus provided tenants with superior accommodations whilst allowing the Authority to utilise capital funds in areas where leasing was not an option [ibid.].

### **3.0 GEHA Housing Design**

In 1965 GEHA was faced with the dilemma of having to 'invent' itself and in doing so determine what sort of design it would use, based upon the expectations of metropolitan based Government employees. Initially, housing and building contracts previously controlled by the SHC under the Government Employees' Housing Scheme, passed to the newly formed Authority [*GEH Act 1964*]. The early years of GEHA were concerned with fulfilling these pre-existing contracts and completing the property transfer program. GEHA inherited a varied stock. However from the very beginning the importance of creating a standard and uniform residence for Government employees was emphasised.



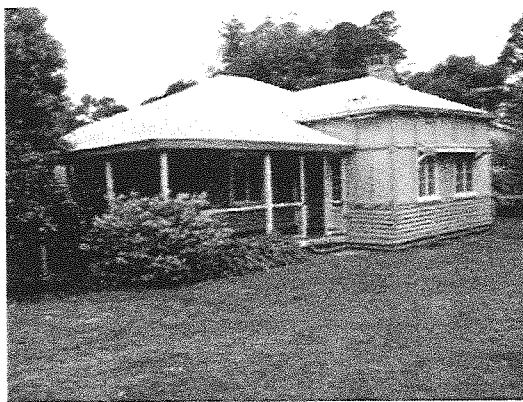
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Habgood Street Northam

## Examples of GEHA's varied housing stock

The first GEHA designs aimed to provide Government employees posted to remote areas with the same standards of living enjoyed by Government employees living in the metropolitan area. Whilst well intended, it was not recognised that providing the same standards of living did not necessarily equate to using the same housing design. The '86 series' was the first design to include amendments in accordance with GEHA standards. Referred to as the 'Craigie House' it was so named in reference to the then most northern suburb of Perth [Stewart 2005]. It was hoped that if tenants were provided with all the recognisable domestic comforts of suburbia, they would be inclined to stay in remote postings longer. The three bedroom timber-framed fibro design included a sleepout which was later enclosed, vinyl tiles and adjustable louvres.



Early GEHA housing, Kirup (left) and Collie

The second GEHA specific design was the '110 series'. Similar in many ways to the 86 series this design was essentially an extension of the 'Craigie House' with an additional bedroom, carpeting in bedroom and living areas and mosaic tiles in the bathroom. The 110 series was the last fibro design. In 1973 a policy of building all new houses in major south-west towns of brick veneer was adopted

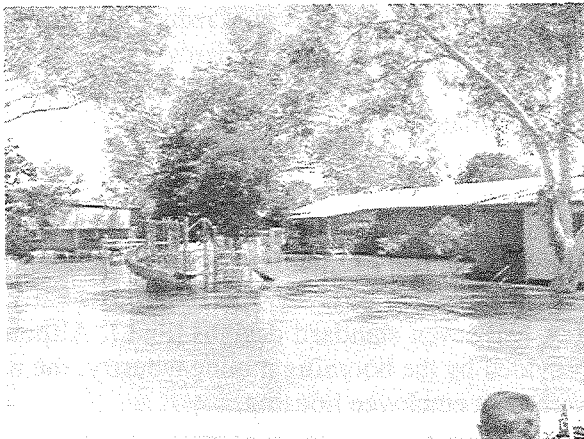
[*GEHA Annual Report 1973*]. It was hoped the high standard new design would reduce maintenance costs and improve general aesthetics. It represented a major shift in overall standards.

Initially the policy of the Authority was to build adequate accommodation with a reasonable standard of amenities, consistent with the level of rental charged. The policy of providing accommodation of 'a good standard' was based upon uniform design. However by the mid 1970s the need to have several standard designs was becoming apparent. In small towns with a high number of GEHA properties, houses were becoming unattractively repetitive. A policy of adapting new designs within a moderate price range to "provide a variation in style" was in place as early as 1973 [*GEHA Annual Report 1973*]. By 1974 GEHA had seven standard designs [*ibid.*]. Although the Authority could not match the standard being provided by the booming mining industry, the new designs diversified and significantly improved Government employee housing.

However these designs, which primarily sought to provide tenants with the 'Australian suburban dream', failed to adequately account for climatic variation and unmarried or childless couples. The designs idealised the nuclear family. Housing was provided with emphasis on the need to "properly house the married man", with singles often coming a poor second [*GEHA Board Minutes 1965*]. Unmarried Government employees, regardless of age, were often lumped together in unattractive units or apartments with little privacy.

For the first decade, the Authority's housing design policy paid little regard to climatic variations between Southern and Northern regions. It was envisaged that Government employees' living in Northern regions should be allowed "to enjoy the same level of accommodation enjoyed in Perth" [*GEHA Annual Report 1966*]. However it was this well-intended emphasis on 'uniformity' that contributed to the inappropriate accommodation built during GEHA's first decade. Until 1973 the designs used in the North West remained the same standard design used by the SHC [*GEHA Annual Report 1973*]. These pre-existing designs were used to safeguard the policy of uniform and standard housing. During these formative years, the need for variation was recognised. However it was considered that using a single design not only promoted uniformity but helped keep building costs to a minimum, especially in costly Northern areas.

Although fans were provided in all living areas of housing in Northern regions, it quickly became apparent that air circulation was woefully inadequate in the face of soaring temperatures in excess of 45 degrees, experienced repeatedly in Northern areas. Following Cabinet approval in 1969, Premier Brand announced that the Government had agreed to progressively install an air-conditioning unit in the main bedroom of each house in the North. Air-conditioning was to be subsidised during "approved" months when the temperature did not fall below 70 degrees Fahrenheit [*GEHA Annual Report 1970*]. By 1978, policy provided for fully ducted air-conditioning in all new Northern houses with an additional unit to be installed in the living room of all older houses sitting above the '50 Day Relative Strain Index Line' [*GEHA Annual Reports 1978-1983*].



The Unpredictable North: flooding, Fitzroy Crossing Primary 2001 (left) and storm damage, Warburton 2005

Over the ensuing forty-two years GEHA designs continuously evolved. Consideration of climatic variation, the push for energy saving designs and attention to the demographic composition of GEHA occupants, characterise GEHA housing today. Recent innovations include a four bedroom house in Kalumburu (figure two) specifically designed to allow singles to live under the same roof with the advantage of 'safety in numbers', whilst retaining maximum privacy. Housing recently constructed in Fitzroy Crossing (figure one) incorporates a variety of lightweight materials and energy saving devices to achieve maximum comfort with a uniquely 'Northern' flavour.



Figure 1. Leased Housing at Fitzroy Crossing

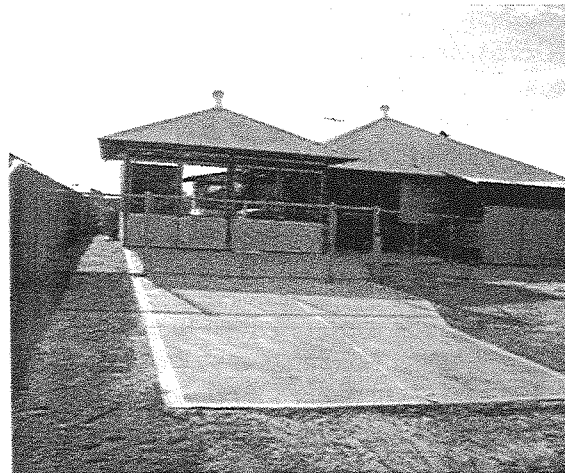


Figure 2. Share House at Kalumburu

#### 4.0 Tenants

No history is complete without the voices of those who lived it. Over the past forty-two years, GEHA has catered for a wide range of tenants from many different professions. Framed against the backdrop of wider social, political, economic and demographic change, their stories and experiences – good, bad or ugly - are nevertheless a part of GEHA, adding anecdotal flavour to the historical landscape.



#### **4.1 The Good**

In most cases contact with GEHA is recalled positively, with those who experienced life before GEHA especially grateful for the raised standards. Before GEHA, in 1960 one teacher in Derby was forced to pitch a tent outside the school while another spent over a month in a cloakroom [*The Government Employee Housing Scheme* 1960]. According to most ex-GEHA tenants, the GEHA lifestyle was a “wonderful life” [*Interviews with ex-GEHA tenants* 2006]. One ex-tenant who eventually purchased her GEHA home and continues to live there to this day, reflects that “I hated traveling sometimes but I now have so many friends in so many places...it was also a great way for kids to grow up” [ibid.]. She adds that “I always treated my GEHA accommodation as homes, not just houses” [ibid.].

#### **4.2 The Bad**

One early GEHA tenant, recalled being in a “very small and dirty” house when Sir Charles Court was in town to open a new building [ibid. p. 5]. As the Principal’s wife she was required to “entertain the dignitaries for morning tea”. Rather than distress herself with the state of her GEHA house she saw it as a golden opportunity to get a large gaping hole in the middle of her living room fixed, strategically placing Sir Court’s coffee and cake next to the hole. The plan backfired considerably when Sir Court failed to see the hole...and very nearly fell through the house. However it did succeed in getting his attention and the hole was duly fixed [ibid.].

#### **4.3 The Ugly**

Another tenant, fed up with the lack of airconditioning in his condemned GEHA transportable, took to the living room wall with a chainsaw and installed it himself. When sewage began to pool in the backyard the condemnation date was thankfully brought forward [ibid.].

#### **4.4 The Good...Again!**

Inevitably the needs and focus of Government policy will evolve over time. Yet despite significant policy change over the past forty-one years, GEHA’s basic obligation to house Government employees has remained constant. How and who is financially accountable may have been redefined but the tenants have not. GEHA’s original mission may have been restated to emphasise a managerial role, but GEHA’s 2005-08 Strategic Plan cites improved service delivery to increase tenant satisfaction as a “strong focus”. Through increased consultation with tenants, GEHA has continued to improve service delivery.

#### **5.0 Conclusions: Where to Now?**

The role GEHA has played in assisting Government to attract skilled personnel to regional areas and providing much needed Government services to communities, has been of vital importance to the continuing growth and development of Western Australia.. With the proclamation of the *Machinery of Government (Miscellaneous Amendments) Act 2006* on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2006, GEHA will merge with the State Housing Commission (Homeswest) and become a business unit of the Department of Housing and Works under the newly formed Housing Authority. This change marks the end of an era for GEHA, but is by no means the end of GEHA. The support of the new Housing Authority will ensure

that GEHA has the necessary resources to continue supplying Government employees with quality accommodation and associated services. Poised upon the precipice of change the significance of the past is not lost. Instead the rich and varied experience and knowledge, lived and learnt by those connected with GEHA over the past forty-two years, remains deeply ingrained within the fabric of Government employee housing in Western Australia and will continue to support and enrich the inevitable march forward into the future.

## 6.0 References

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