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Lives in the sky

A look at African-Australian communities inside Melbourne's high-rise public housing

In this narrative, authors James Button and Julie Szego speak to young people from African backgrounds who have grown up in or live in Melbourne's high-rise Housing Commission flats. They describe a thriving community unique to the Flats, challenged by intergenerational divides, tensions with authorities, the pervasive influence of the online world, and new pressures driven by a global pandemic. A generation of African-Australians grew up in public housing. Their confident voices shed new light on a rapidly changing nation.

Authors' Biographies

James Button, a former Walkley Award winning journalist and speechwriter, is Narrator of the Scanlon Institute for Applied Social Cohesion Research. The role of the Narrator is to curate academic reports, commentary and publications that relate to social cohesion, and synthesise the thinking into a narrative that brings their rationale and findings to the fore and encourages consideration.

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James Button and Julie Szego are freelance journalists. This article was commissioned by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute as part of a series of narratives on immigration and multiculturalism in Australia. These narratives are published at **scanloninstitute.org.au/narratives**

Introduction

When Nor Shanino was a teenager in the early 2000s and wanted company on a Saturday morning, he would go to the 20th floor of his building and start knocking on doors. Many families had six or seven kids living in three-bedroom apartments, so it didn't take him long to find someone he knew. Then the pair would knock on another door, and another, and before long a group of ten noisy boys would be slowly descending in the building's shuddering lift before emerging to play in Debneys Park, the large green space that lies beside the four high-rise buildings commonly known as the Flemington Housing Commission flats.

No one had any money, so families didn't have gaming consoles or multiple TVs, Nor says. Instead, all day, he and his male friends played sport. In summer it was cricket or tennis, in winter, football or soccer, "whatever was on TV at the time." There was basketball, too, and next to the court was a bench under a big tree where people went to talk. "We called that bench the Parliament. If people got into an argument, we'd say, 'Take it to the Parliament.'"

In a car park at the centre of the estate boys would play cricket or stickball, a version of baseball played on the streets of American cities. Nor says: "You know in old American movies, how the kids are playing in the street, and then a car comes and everyone moves? That was my childhood. That's how we grew up. I thought everyone grew up like that."

It was at Northcote High School that Nor learnt his childhood was different from other children his age. Not only because his Eritrean father had brought him to Australia from Sweden when Nor was 11, but because he lived in high-rise public housing. "The kids (at Northcote) would say things like, 'What are you doing on Saturday? Can you come over at 5 o'clock? I've asked my mum and she's OK with it.' I never heard anyone talk like that in public housing. We never made plans, we just knocked on each other's door. There were 4,000 of us living in 300 square metres. We were never alone."

Nor, a 34-year old youth worker, is part of a generation of African-Australians who grew up in Melbourne's high-rise Housing Commission flats, or who lived in it for long periods. In May we spoke to 12 people from this group about their experiences

in high-rise public housing in the inner suburbs of Flemington, North Melbourne, Fitzroy, Collingwood and Carlton. This conversation organised by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, and follow-up interviews with seven people who took part in it, reveal that far from sharing the largely negative community perception of the Housing Commission flats, these first and second generation Australians have great affection for their high-rise homes.

They are not blind to the problems of 'the Flats', as everyone calls them. They speak frankly of the absent fathers in some families, the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse, the clashes with police. Nevertheless, they see their experience of public housing as rich, making them resilient and ready for life in Australia.

They also see the life they knew as endangered by social and technological change, by intergenerational tensions within families, by the growing withdrawal of many young people into online worlds — and by a sudden crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At 5pm, Saturday 4 July, Farhio Nur, 28, was returning to her Flemington high rise building from her sister's place in Ascot Vale when she saw police cars surrounding the estate. "They (the police) said that if I go in to the flat I can't come out again for five days," Farhio says. She returned to Ascot Vale.

At about the same time, Anisa Ali, 24, was visiting relatives in the north-western suburbs when a Facebook message alerted her that Victorian Premier Dan Andrews was giving a media conference. That's how she learnt that her North Melbourne building was under police guard. Anisa went home to the apartment she shares with her mother and younger brother, and is now unable to leave.

The abrupt lockdown of nine public housing towers in Flemington and North Melbourne, in which 3000 people cannot leave their homes, was the most draconian quarantine of any inflicted on Australians during the COVID-19 pandemic. Media reports of people short of food, the elderly cut off from caregivers, parents without enough baby formula to last through the lockdown, laid bare the anxiety in the towers.

Nor Shanino no longer lives in the Flemington high-rise, but with his business partner and friend, Somali-born community leader Ahmed Dini, who was locked down in the North Melbourne Flats, he found himself in a leadership role trying to sort out the initial chaos created by the government's decision. Together the two young men

worked the phones, negotiating with community organisations and government agencies to finally distribute food to the stunned, fearful and occasionally angry residents, while at the same time passing messages to residents that the best response to the crisis was to observe social distancing, and to get tested.

Nor's sister, Hiba Shanino, 21, who lives in the Flemington Flats, wrote an article in *The Guardian* criticising the government's "forceful approach", the lack of notice, and the fact that too few social and community workers were allowed onto the estates to tell residents what was going on. But, she added, "we do believe that we should be locked down…We have a lot of people here who are vulnerable, and a lot of elderly people, so now it's good that there is an awareness of what is going on in our community, and some help."

The lockdown brought national attention to a community few Australians know anything about. The 44 Housing Commission towers that loom over Melbourne's inner suburbs don't have a good reputation. It's not just occasional media stories of drug use, vandalism and violence in their public spaces, of residents living in fear. It's the fact that the grey-and-white buildings are such a defining feature of the Melbourne skyline, yet the estates on which they stand are so closed off from their surrounding streets and suburbs, that people who don't live in them tend to assume that the problems of one are common to all. Outsiders rarely walk through them, either out of fear or a sense that it would be disrespectful to the residents, like walking through a private garden. It all breeds certain stereotypes: the Flats are 'chicken coops in the sky,' degrading to human dignity, at worst dangerous to live in, and liable to send their residents a bit crazy. This week broadcaster Neil Mitchell called them "multi-storey monstrosities."

The Flats' origin story tends to confirm these views. Victoria's then Housing Commission built the towers between 1962 and 1976 as part of what was known as "slum clearance". Similar programs occurred in Sydney and in cities overseas after World War Two. The modernist ideology of the time favoured replacing cramped and often unsewered housing in tight streets and lanes with well-appointed apartments in the air, plain and uniform but clean. Poverty would be abolished by engineering. But attitudes changed; people came to see the towers as soulless and brutal, destroyers of community. Gentrification only reinforced these views, since the new inner city middle-class had no connection with the public housing residents, even though they sometimes lived a mere 100 metres apart.

But in the Flats, largely out of sight, a piece of multicultural Australia was being formed. What shaped it were the very conditions that outsiders thought were so oppressive, and that are now seen as so dangerous during the COVID-19 pandemic — thousands of people thrown together in rooms, stairwells and corridors that all look the same.

The Housing Commission at first allocated about two-thirds of the towers to mixed housing, mostly for families, and the other third to elderly, often single person, housing. In the 1960s, the first tenants came not only from Australia but from northern and southern Europe — Britain, Greece, Italy and the former Yugoslavia. In the early 1970s, Turkish migrants formed a large share of new residents; after 1975 refugees came from Vietnam, East Timor and South America. From the mid-1990s, many newcomers were refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, the former USSR and the Baltic States, and from the Horn of Africa – Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea — along with Sudan, and what is now South Sudan.

About half of these African migrants, who number just under 50,000, live in Melbourne. Overwhelmingly, they arrived in the 1990s and 2000s through Australia's off-shore humanitarian program, family reunion or via secondary migration from countries such as New Zealand. Thousands of African families were settled in inner-city public housing. In the Carlton estates, for example, the most common birthplaces, after Australia, are China, Vietnam and Horn of Africa countries. Even these tenants can be affected by the stigma around public housing.

Hamdi Ali, who lives in the Carlton commission towers, came to Australia in the early 1990s as an 18 year-old, the last leg of a journey out of a rebellious Somali enclave in Ethiopia that had been devastated by war. His journey included being smuggled into Nairobi in the back of a truck transporting livestock after the outbreak of civil war forced him to flee the refugee camp where he was living in Somalia. His acculturation into the "Australian psyche" was rapid as he finished his disrupted schooling, studied at TAFE and drove taxis. He detected "some negativity" about public housing estates, and took the message on board. During the five years he spent on the housing waiting list as a single man, Hamdi would regularly visit the Office of Housing for updates. "They'd say, 'You want to go to the high rise, right? And I said, 'No way!'" he recalls, chuckling.

But Hamdi's views changed after a stint living with his brother in the high-rise on Lygon Street, Carlton. "When I moved in I saw a completely different world. I so much loved it." Carlton was a haven for migrant families trying to get ahead. While some

other inner-city commission blocks required 24/7 security and a concierge to keep a watchful eye on visitors, the Carlton estate had no concierge and was only patrolled between 7pm and 3am. The place is still relatively safe, Hamdi says. In 2001 he travelled to Kenya for an arranged marriage. By 2005, after a prolonged dispute with the Immigration Department, Hamdi and his new wife, Fatuma Hassen, and their two children were finally on their way to Australia, and to his delight, a high-rise Carlton commission flat in his own name.

As much as they could, new migrants settled in estates that already housed their own. Vietnamese people often moved to Richmond and Fitzroy, East Timorese to Collingwood, and Somalis and Eritreans to North Melbourne and Flemington. In North Melbourne, 24-year old Anisa Ali's high-rise building houses large numbers of the Majerteen, a Somali clan to which she belongs through her father.

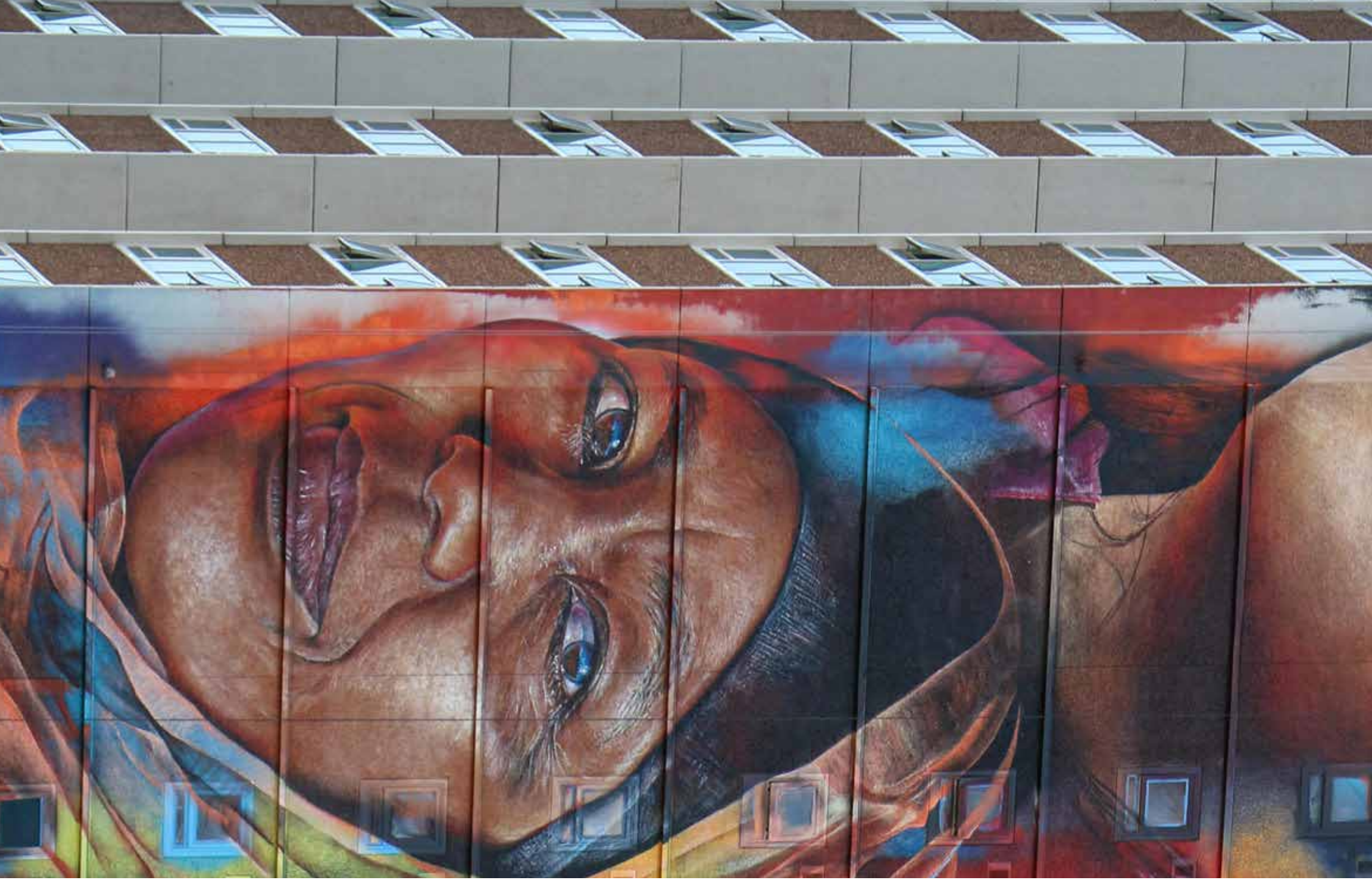
Yet while most of Anisa's childhood friends in the Flats were Somali and Eritrean, she was also close to a Vietnamese boy called James. Her mother, Kelli, an Australian of Anglo-Celtic and Indigenous background who has converted to Islam (her father is not in her life), befriended a number of Eritreans in their building. "I've never had a negative experience living in the flats," Anisa says. "A lot of us come from similar circumstances in East Africa — wartorn countries, corrupt governments, and so on. That makes us very bonded, very close."

In the Fitzroy flats, formally known as the Atherton Gardens Estate, Anab Mohamud's story is quite different. When she first moved in, few Africans lived there, and for a long time she lived alone.

Anab, a 31-year old community worker, was born in Somalia but, like many refugees, has led a life of constant motion. In 2000, when she was 11, her family migrated from the vast and troubled Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya to the western suburbs of Melbourne. At Hoppers Crossing Secondary College she would take on anyone who tried to pick on the group of kids who had adopted her as one of their own. "They were the nerds, really good people. I stood up for them. I was quite rebellious for someone from my culture," she says.

At 16, after one too many fights in her home, she was on the move again. She couch-surfed at friends' places in the high-rise flats in Carlton and Fitzroy, before deciding she wanted to stay. "It wasn't normal for a 16-year old girl to get a flat on her own. But I called the Department of Housing every single day for three months, until I got one."

Most of her Hoppers Crossing friends had been “Anglo”, but in the Fitzroy flats she mixed with people whose backgrounds were Asian, Australian and Arab, along with a few Somalis. Because she hung out with a group of boys and did not cover her hair in the Muslim way, some of the Somali elders said she had lost her way. Sometimes they used much harsher language than that. There were a lot of drugs and alcohol in the Flats, and Anab saw people, Somalis and others, turn to them, and could have done so herself, she admits. Instead, she worked in shops and hospitality, got qualified in early childhood education and pathology services, nearly joined the army but instead had a child, Aisha, who is now seven. “I stayed strong,” Anab says. “I had to raise myself.”



Growing up in the Flats: a giant family

Farhio Nur also has vivid childhood memories. "During the summer holidays every year it used to get very hot in the Flats. So there was this tradition; at 4am all the kids would go down to the oval at Debneys Park, have water fights. Parents and friends took their mats down and drank tea. Even remembering this makes me happy."

The living room in the Flemington flat that Farhio, shares with her parents, Abdi Salan Mohamud and Lul Qali, and her four-year old nephew, Emaad, gestures to the family's native Somalia and Muslim faith. On the floor are Afghan and Turkish rugs, and Lebanese prayer mats in red, green and brown. The sofa has an Arabian-style floral draping, and by the window is a teapot, or *darmuus*, for serving a sugary brew of cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, cloves and a sprinkling of pepper. A cable TV box streams news from Somalia's northeastern Puntland region, where her father still has family. After an outbreak of violence, or during Somali elections, Farhio's parents are glued to the screen. But while Farhio has visited Somalia twice in the past six years, it's hard for her to "feel connected in the same way."

She was three when her family arrived in Australia, refugees from Somalia's clan-based civil war. Within four years they'd moved into the Flemington estate, joining a growing cluster of African migrants there. "Our parents were brought here for a better life," Farhio explains. "They didn't speak English, didn't understand the Australian culture. They wanted to be around their fellow country-women and men. If they had been placed in Ballarat or Bendigo, Melton or Werribee a lot of stories would have been lost, a lot of bonds wouldn't have been formed."

In an effort to keep those bonds, Somalis who moved to suburbs such as Werribee and Heidelberg West tried to settle near members of their own clan. "People often joke that you can tell which clan someone belongs to from the first four digits of their phone number." Farhio says this clannishness is even more intense in Somali communities in the UK and Canada, where clans are big among young people.

But she believes the dense population of the Flats not only brought Somalis together but mixed them up with everyone else. She reels off the nationalities on the estate: “Ethiopians, Sudanese, Vietnamese…I had a Chinese neighbour for 17 years. We shared a laundry; people become like distant family without you even realising it. When she moved out we just hugged each other.”

Growing up in the concrete towers felt safe. People had your back, and still do, Farhio says. For instance, neighbours rushed to the Nur family door recently with offers of help, after Farhio’s younger sister, Emaad’s mother, was rushed to hospital in the night. In the Flats, bad news travels fast but it’s often pursued by good deeds.

Farhio remembers a childhood of relative freedom and independence. At 15 she took a job working at a call centre in Bourke Street in the city; her mother, taught her how to come home on public transport. “Somali women are very independent, you wouldn’t see that in other Muslim communities.” Her mother, who runs a family day-care business from home, knows virtually everyone, and is “always running up and down” between the flats. Her father drove taxis for 15 years before setting up as a mechanic. Two years ago he burnt his arm so badly while changing a fuel tank that he required a skin graft and an extended period off work. Somalis living in the Flats and running restaurants on Racecourse Road, where her father ritually drank tea, pitched in to cover six months of his business rental.

These ties remain strong. Farhio has put her paramedic studies on hold to focus on a home-care business she runs in Ascot Vale with her business partner, Ridwan Mohamud, a registered nurse and also of Somali background. “I lived in 420, she lived in 418, we grew up together, sharing food our whole lives.”

Sharing food was a big part of life in the Flats. In North Melbourne, a group of mothers with lots of children would split the cooking between them. One would make rice, one meat, one desserts, and so on. During Ramadan, the most sacred month of the year in Islam, Somalis cook special dishes, including samosas, or *sambuus, buur*, a doughy sweet, and a sweet pancake called *malawah*. Whatever time of year, there are bananas with nearly every meal, and always meat. “You’ll never get to meet a vegan Somali,” says Anisa.

Around dinner time in Flemington, Nor Shanino’s stepmother would say, ‘Hey, take these plates up to your auntie.’ Kids would be running between floors with plates. One or two elderly residents would often turn up for dinner without warning, and the family would have an extra plate ready in case they did. “There was one gentleman,

Eritrean, an old family friend, who lived on his own, he would have been 80 at least," Nor says. "He would just go around to different households, show up right at the start of dinner. And my father would say, 'Hey, you didn't come to us for a week. What's going on? We expect you to come more often than that.' And he's like, 'I've got to do the rounds.'"

Nor's family had two apartments right above each other. His father, stepmother, and youngest siblings were downstairs, and the older siblings upstairs. At first the family numbered eight, but then a cousin, then an uncle, migrated to Australia, and lived with them for a while. Then his older brother moved out, his older sister got married and moved to Canada. Life was constant movement. If someone died, the flat would be full of visitors, sometimes for days. There was no dining room table, people ate sitting on the floor, as they did in Africa. "Even a lot of African families in the suburbs, with a big house and a big dining room table, they'll still sit on the floor," Nor says. " And no one had a desk to study on, there was no room."

Nor's sister, Hiba, a legal practice student at RMIT, still lives on the fifth floor with her older sister and her mother, Mariam, Nor's stepmother, who runs a family day-care business from the flat. Hiba and Nor's father, Idris, who runs a cleaning franchise, met Hiba's mother in Australia in the 1990s, after Nor's mother had died while the family was still in Sweden. Both Idris and Mariam had been displaced in Eritrea's border war with Ethiopia; Idris worked as a book keeper for oil companies in Libya and Saudi Arabia before migrating to Sweden as a refugee. The couple have eight children between them; Hiba is the only one common to both, and Australian-born.

She emerged as a potential voice of her community in 2016, after *The Age* reported that "white flight" from inner city schools was leading to unofficial segregation along race and class lines. This was not news to Hiba. At her high school, Mount Alexander College, the predominantly migrant or refugee students from Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and Vietnam ranked among the poorest in the state, despite soaring housing prices in the area. With 319 enrolments, the school was undersubscribed by half. In an interview with *The Age* journalist, Hiba, then in Year 9, criticised the "kerbside" judgments of the affluent. "At Mount Alexander College you learn so much, especially because it is a multicultural school. You hear these amazing stories about war, about loss ... and it makes you appreciate what you have." The journalist described Hiba as "a fiery advocate for her school."

Some of Hiba's happiest childhood memories revolve around the community centre in Debneys Park. On weekends and holidays the estate kids converged on the centre for

Arabic and jewellery-making classes, homework clubs, poetry and televised soccer nights. “And heaps of movie nights,” Hiba recalls. “They’d hold polls for movies you’d want to watch.” Everyone knew each other. “The receptionist at the centre was your neighbour. The people running the youth programs were your friends. The people working there were my community and I felt safe.”

South Sudanese refugees had a similar experience, says Awak Kongor, a 25-year old youth worker and film scriptwriter. She says they are so attached to the Flats because they remind them of their former lives in Egypt, to which they often moved before coming to Australia as refugees. Awak lived in Khartoum in Sudan, then in Luxor Egypt, before arriving in Australia in 2001, at the age of six. “In Egypt we all lived in high rise,” she says. “Egypt is burnt into my memory. It’s incredibly nostalgic for all of us.”

Although Awak never lived in Melbourne’s high-rise, she spent so much time in the Collingwood flats as a girl, staying for as long as two weeks with an aunty or a family friend, that it felt like home. Her actual home was in Footscray, in Melbourne’s inner west. People from the Flats often came to Footscray to get their hair done at one of its African hair salons. “Hair is a very important part of our culture, part of our mental health plan,” Awak says. “In the salon people would be speaking Dinka, Arabic, English — ‘Oh you’ve grown so much, you’ve put on weight, you’re so much older, where is my life going?’ Getting your hair done was important for certain events at certain times of the year, for getting dressed up, for going to church at Christmas. Footscray used to be full of people getting their hair done!” If there were too many people in the salon, someone would say to Awak, ‘Come to my place and I’ll do it there.’ And so Awak would find herself back in the Flats.

“In the high rise you spend a lot of time in communal spaces,” she says. “It’s very intimate, you are forced to get to know each other. You know every crevice, every hole, every corner of those flats. You’ve just come out of war, so finding another black or African person in your building is crazy. We grew up figuring out our identities. We were all fish out of water at the same time.”

Awak most remembers the parks on the estates. “The parks were pristine. I remember hanging on the monkey bars, and the scenes through the trees were so pretty. Or we painted, or community organisations would get involved and decide what the kids would do. It was just a huge adventure. All of our cousins, all our friends, met there. We were tiny so everything was oversized to us. Late to us was when the street lights came on. I really felt like the park was the most magical place on Earth.”

A lot of the kids were East African, but not all. “There was a Billy here, an Emily there. I have strong memories of a Jason, and Jack and Jarrod riding bikes. There was no discrimination, or I didn’t notice it at least.” At night, “we all slept in one room, like we did in Egypt.”

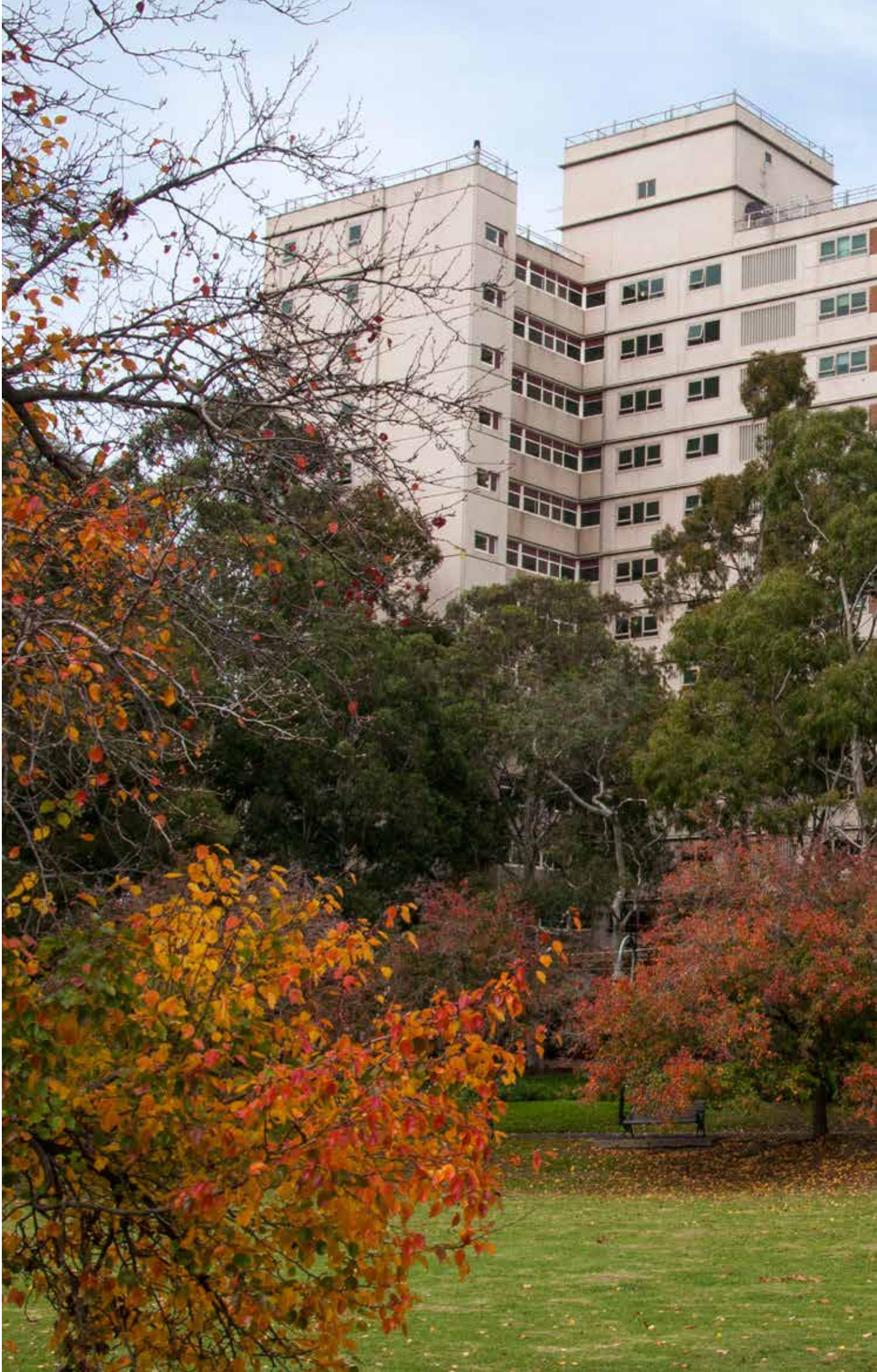
It was the excitement of being packed together, with so much going on around them, that the young people most remember. Many had been born in one place, grown up in another, and their lives reflected a kaleidoscope of cultures. Nor’s older brother, Osman, has never lived in America but “has a weirdly New York accent in some things he says. He doesn’t sound Australian. When he got to Australia, aged 16, he had been watching a lot of mobster movies — *Scarface*, *Casino*, *Donnie Brasco*, and learning English from them. So, he would say things like, ‘I’m gonna bury those cockroaches,’ or like Don Corleone in *The Godfather*: ‘That I cannot do for you.’ And I’m like, ‘Mate, we live in Australia. We don’t call people cockroaches here.’”

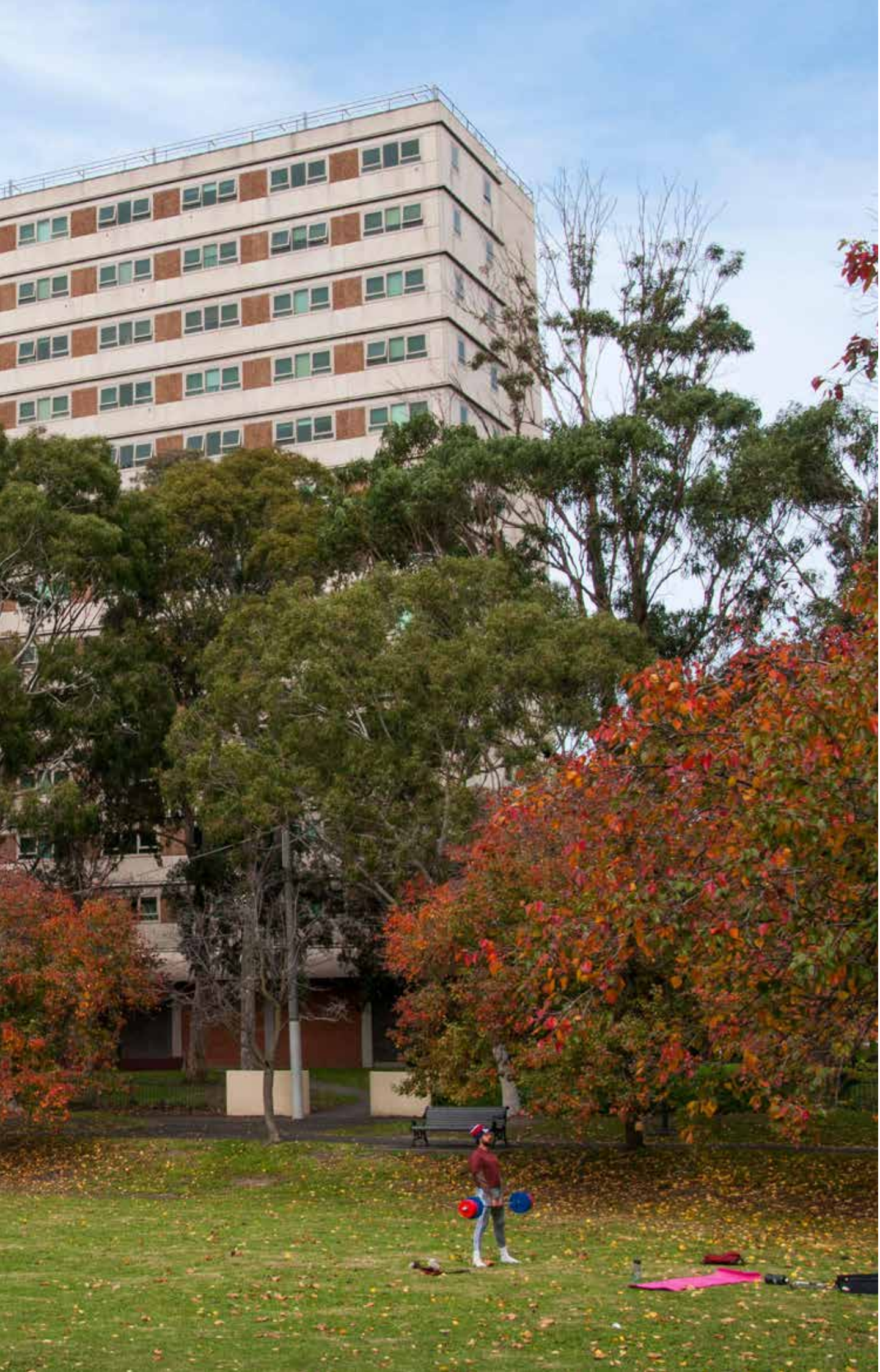
The language of the Flats was lively, blunt, at times brutal. A friend’s older brother had been locked up for a serious drug problem; an uncle had beaten up an auntie — children discussed everything, Nor says. Somalis are especially frank. A man with one eye was simply addressed as ‘One Eye’; another, with serious leg problems, was called LG - short for *langa*, or one-legged. Other Africans called Somalis “banana eaters” because they ate the fruit with every meal. “In Australia that’s rude or inappropriate behaviour. But we come from a culture where you say things frankly and upfront. There is this idea that if someone’s being honest, you can’t really fault them.”

Yet for all his happy memories, Nor sees both positives and negatives in the life he knew. The friends he made in public housing remain the closest he has. “Some of us grew up and grew apart. But when we run into each other, it’s literally like we pick up where we left off. I had a circle of 20 guys who I probably saw every day for 10 years, sometimes spending six, seven hours a day together. Those guys are as close as me as my brothers.”

But perhaps that was too close. Perhaps, he wonders, the estate was too much of a fortress, too closed off from mainstream Australia. Some of the brightest people he knew from the estate “go to uni and it’s a struggle. Not the studies or the schedule, but the cultural struggle. A lot of them didn’t even make it past first semester. They were like, ‘No, uni’s not for me. I can’t do it.’ I tell them, ‘Hey, you’ve got to understand that all of a sudden you’re out of your comfort zone.’ A lot of them have never really spoken to someone outside of that bubble of public housing, apart from maybe a

teacher. You sit them in front of someone from outside their estate, and they just shut down." He tells the story of a friend, "a very funny guy, a very honest guy," who went to university but never told his new classmates were he came from.
One day they were all on a tram to do an exam at the Showgrounds. As they passed the Flemington high-rise, a good friend of Nor's friend said: "Oh my God, imagine growing up there, how would you end up?" They asked Nor's friend what he thought and he said, "I imagine it would be very difficult." A few days later he said to Nor: "I've been angry ever since. I was so disappointed with myself, so pissed. I should have just told them."





Problems in the Flats: from "Junkieville" to racial targeting by police

In Flemington, young people gave each building a nickname. Nor and his friends called their building the Kingdom because the cool people lived there. Another was One Tweezy, an American rap term for 120, the building's street number. And then there was Junkieville.

Junkieville was the name for a set of little walk-up buildings that Nor says are now completely broken down. "A lot of people who came out of jail, who were very badly on drugs or whatever, lived there. Anyone who had kids made sure they got out of there. It was literally about 50 metres from my building."

The Shanino family moved into Flemington at the tail end of Victoria's heroin epidemic, when drugs were a reality of life on some estates. "If you wanted to, you could get whatever you wanted very easily," Nor says. "We had somebody that was dealing literally at our doorstep. We opened the door and he was one metre in front of us." At Northcote High, the sight of two young men preparing to inject in the park behind the school one day caused pandemonium, with students running in all directions, apart from Nor and another boy from the Flemington estate, who continued their kick-to-kick football game. The assistant principal rushed and told Nor to walk slowly away from the men and towards him. "I'm thinking, 'All this drama. I saw two guys shooting up on the stairs this morning.'"

People on drugs were just part of the community, Nor says. "Everyone knew them. No one was scared of them. They were usually the nicest people, because they didn't want problems. I still see some of those people around. They don't remember you. Some of them are begging, or just sitting there, talking to themselves." But this grim exposure also had a perversely positive side. "Because we grew up around it, we saw what it did to people. We were like, 'No, I'm not going to do that, because I know where that leads. I think that was true for 90 to 95 per cent of us."

"It was a roller coaster in the flats," agrees his sister, Hiba. "Looking back on it, there were neighbours who were alcoholics. I remember very vividly the parents fighting. The kids were very young, always running round the corridor and stuff. I remember being young and seeing kids shooting-up heroin. Some did it inside their house; some outside, on the staircase or in the lobby. These were usually people who, to put it mildly, were Caucasian. You knew who the dealers were in the building; some lived there, some didn't... There were these two brothers ... they had an apartment but they were in-and-out all the time." An older heroin addict had routine visits from a social worker. One day the social worker knocked on the man's door to no response. "I remember the police turning up. They unscrewed the windows and broke the fly screen to get in. He'd died."

Both Farhio and Hiba see prescription drug abuse as a growing problem in the Flats. Anti-Depressants, Xanax — "they've worked out a system about how to get it," Hiba explains. "Sometimes they'll tell you themselves. Or they'll have 'episodes.' The neighbours will gossip about it in the laundry room."

Hiba got her first inkling of how people outside the estate might perceive the people within, during a painting class at her Catholic primary school in Kensington, where she mingled with wealthier children whose "childhood was not like mine." One day, "we were painting in class and there was newspaper covering the table and I saw a story about the police beating up brutally a boy who lived on the estate. And I thought, 'OK, this is what's happening where I live. And this is the notion people have about Flemington.' Because for me the police circling all the time was normal."

The biggest problems often came from outside. Farhio recalls young men "running amok" when multi-ethnic gangs, some from far-flung suburbs, brawled with local boys on the estate grounds. Sometimes federal anti-terror units were involved.

At Mount Alexander College, Hiba recalls students leaving after Year 9 "in ridiculously high numbers." Just six or seven from her initial cohort at the Flats stuck it out till Year 12 graduation. Often, the kids who failed to finish school became withdrawn; shunning the community centre, disappearing from the estate for days at a time.

Somali community leaders referred to the culturally-adrift young men in their ranks as "the lost ones." Farhio says: "The problem was that Victoria Police had no link with the community and the community had no link with the parents whose kids were in trouble."

In 2011 an Office of Police Integrity report raised a concern of excessive force and "racial targeting" by police against young men of African background in north-west Melbourne. Two years later, Victoria Police settled a case brought against it by six young men alleging racial profiling and discrimination between 2005 and 2009. It was one of a long list of complaints made against police in Flemington and Moonee Valley in that period. The men were from African families living in the Flemington, Kensington and North Melbourne Flats. As part of the settlement, police promised to examine their public relations and cultural awareness training.

Nor Shanino was not part of that group of six men but he and his friend Ahmed Dini, also from the Flemington high-rise, had their own tussles with police. In 2010 the police paid Dini $70,000 in an out-of-court settlement after he alleged that an officer had smashed him in the face with a torch while he was handcuffed, breaking his teeth. A magistrate found that police had "unlawfully touched" Dini.

Police would often say to young African men, "Let me catch you when the sun goes down," Nor says. "We knew them by name. We would be sitting there, and a car would pull up, and depending on which coppers were jumping out of the car, there was a good chance you're going to get beaten up. So, everyone just ran."

When Nor was 18, two police officers pulled up at the front of his building. One asked why Nor's friend, who had just driven off, had been parked in the loading zone. Nor said he didn't know, he didn't own the car. The officer "turned around and said, 'You're an effing smartass, aren't you?' And I didn't say anything, I'd been beaten up before. Then he goes to me, 'You know what? Go home.' I was like, 'What do you mean? I'm over 18. I don't have a curfew. I'm standing on the sidewalk, I haven't done anything wrong. You can't tell me to go home. You don't have the authority.'"

"'And he's like, 'Yeah? How about I show you my authority.' The only thing that shocked me was, he's going to do this at three in the afternoon, in front of mothers and witnesses. And I just said to him, 'No, I'm not going home.' And he's like, 'I'm going to come back in ten minutes, and if you're here, I'm going to kick your effing head in.' So, I got upset, and I said, 'You know what? I'm not going anywhere. I haven't done anything wrong. You can't tell me to get off the streets.' I even said to him, 'This is not South Africa.' And then he got really angry, and he goes, 'I'm going to do this and do that to you.' And I'm like, 'Let me guess, you're going to chase me at night.' So he swung the door open and he was telling me, 'I'm going to effing kick your head in.' And I took a few steps back thinking, 'Wait, are they doing this in broad daylight now? I'm not going to run, but do I fight back, or do I just let him beat me up?'

“So he tries to get out, but he was so angry he forgot to take off his seatbelt. And then the senior one, with the stripes on, who hasn’t said nothing at this point, he grabs him and says, ‘Don’t worry about it. Let it go.’ And I’m thinking, ‘That’s the good one.’ So I look down and I say, ‘Thanks, mate.’ And he goes, ‘Eff off you effing monkey. We’ll see you after dark.’

“That happened a few times. And I remember one day the junior officer actually got out, chased me and yelled out, ‘I told you I was going to catch you.’ But I was too quick for him. For us, that was just a part of living in public housing. One police officer, believe it or not, in seven days he pulled me over five times and searched my whole car in the same street, my street. And I’m like, ‘You did this yesterday and the day before.’ And he’s like, ‘What are you going to do about it?’”

Generational tensions in navigating a new country

Nor would get into big debates with his father, Idris, about the police, and the country. "His perception of Australia is so different from me and anyone younger than me. He looks at it as the greatest country in the world. He's like, 'OK, if someone says something racist to you or the cops pull you over, you think that's bad? I've seen Gaddafi's men just shoot people on the street. Here, if I pick up the phone, the ambulance, the police, the fire department will show up in minutes. In Libya, in Saudi, I've seen people die because they can't get an ambulance, because they don't have the money to get into the hospital.'"

Nor says his father recently "went on this one-hour rant. He got this letter from the ATO saying, 20 per cent of your taxes went to transportation, schools whatever. And he says, 'I've lived in countries where people are paying ridiculous amounts of taxes. They don't have a single paved road. There's no electricity. There's nothing. You're so lucky to be here, you're so blessed.' The fact that your government is telling you what they're doing with the money they take from you was just mindboggling to him."

Over time the strife cemented a new communal solidarity. Hiba recalls her parents attending town hall meetings about relations between the estate and the police. There were rowdy debates about "police stopping African kids." The police brutality cases drew attention to the lives of young Africans in Melbourne, and opened up new roles for Nor and Ahmed, whose victory in court in 2007, he later told a journalist, was the moment that led him to "love this country more than any in the world."

Ahmed was named as a Victorian Local Hero in the 2012 Australian of the Year awards, and got a job as a multicultural officer at the Essendon Football Club. Nor went from working on the floor at Safeway and Woolworths and running a small cleaning business to doing work with the Multicultural Commission and the Department of Premier and Cabinet. He attended dinners and events of "the Jewish

Council, the Chinese League, the Irish Chamber of Commerce." He and Ahmed set up their own non-profit organisation, the Ubuntu Project, to advance their work advising on multicultural youth issues. The young men both sit on the implementation committee of the Victorian Government's African Communities Action Plan.

The government and multicultural organisations had chosen their targets well. Nor and Ahmed had lived the lives of young Africans in Melbourne, but they also brought the drive and optimism of immigrants. Ahmed had spent five years in a Kenyan refugee camp, seen daily rapes by the militia, an imam murdered in broad daylight. Nor's experience was nothing like as fraught, but in public housing in the small town of Vaxjo in central Sweden, he had grown up with refugees from all over the world, had heard his father's stories of being arrested by Libyan police, beaten into a coma and jailed for months, over a case of mistaken identity. At the age of seven Nor had seen far right Swedish nationalists march through his town carrying Nazi flags. Immigration gave he and Ahmed a wider perspective that younger African Australians don't always have. These generational divides emerged during this week's lockdown of the Flemington and North Melbourne Flats. While older people were generally more accepting of the severe restrictions, young people born here were more likely to see their rights infringed by the official approach, and Nor, Ahmed and others tried to be a bridge between the two.

"Ahmed and I talk about this a lot," says Nor. "Because we came here as refugees at the age of ten, we knew we were outsiders and we were OK with it. But these kids who are born in Royal Women's Hospital, all they know is Australia. When their parents take them back to Eritrea, Somalia, they're outsiders. They don't understand nothing there. They're Westerners, that's how they're seen. And then they come back here and they're still outsiders. I think that creates resentment."

Being unable to talk to their parents exacerbates the sense of estrangement. "We have a lot of kids that can barely put together a sentence in Arabic or Somali, and their parents can barely put together a sentence in English. Those of us who came as immigrants knew our mother tongue. We're not genius at it, but we're able to have a basic conversation with our parent. But for a lot of kids now that doesn't really happen." If they experience racism, "they can't talk to their parents because, they say, 'I don't want to put that stress on them when I know they can't do anything about it. So I just have to suck it up.' And this is a 14-year-old kid saying that to you."

It worries Nor that young people of African background are not registering to vote. Or that "young kids who grow up here, especially in public housing, by the ages of 12 or 13 will say to me, 'I would never go to uni. It is a waste of time. Australia is a racist country. You think someone's going to give me a corporate job? You think I could ever be a lawyer in this country? A journalist? No.' That's at 12. I always tell people that's dangerous, because why would they even try at school? Even if he's going to grow out of it by 18 or 19, his options are very limited now. I said to one kid, 'Why do you think that? You're a kid. What do you know?' And he's like, 'My sister's got two degrees. She's been looking for a job for two years.' And I say, 'Maybe your application wasn't that good. Maybe you need to work on your interview skills. Now you dismiss everything by saying everyone's racist. Trust me, I've seen racists. I've had to sit down and watch blatant racists sit there with a smile on their face. I've been beaten up by Victoria police officers. But that's not always the case.'

"Yes there is bias, all those issues. But also, they (young African Australians) are very defensive now. If I don't get something, it's because I'm black, because that person is a racist. If you're only within the bubble, all you hear about is how white people are racists and how they don't give opportunities. And as soon as you don't get that one, or two, or three opportunities, that is evidence of what you already thought."

Nor spoke recently to a group of young African-Australian VCE students. "I said, 'Yes, OK, there is racism. There is discrimination. But there are also companies that want to appear to be multicultural. So, sometimes, if you're really smart about it, you can use the fact that you wear a scarf, or that you're black or whatever, as a selling point. I can sit there and say, 'My life was so difficult, we were eight kids, and we had one TV.' Or I can say, 'I speak English and Arabic and Swedish, and growing up among eight kids, I had to learn how to work in a team.'' A lot of them had never thought about that."

Nor and Ahmed have become brokers of sorts between parts of the African community and the mainstream, trying to explain one to the other. In Melbourne, they talk to non-African Australians who like to think they live in one of the world's most multicultural cities but who, when pressed, admit they have never met an African, or a Muslim. "Eventually they get comfortable enough and they come back with questions: 'I read this thing about Muslims — is it true?'"

But they also talk to people like Ali, a Somali friend of Nor's older brother. "We're having coffee and he's like, 'What, you guys think you're Australians?' Ahmed said, 'I am Australian, what do you mean?' And he's like, 'You're not white.'

And Ahmed's like, 'I don't need to be white to be Australian. The first Australians were not white, what are you talking about? And I don't need anyone to recognise me as an Australian, just like I don't need someone to recognise me as a Muslim or as a Somali. I am what I am, whether you like it or not.'

"And it just went back and forth. I said to him (Ali) at one point, 'When you go overseas and get in trouble, all of a sudden you're an Australian, right?' And he laughed because that's true.' But he kept saying, 'They will never accept you, or your children, no matter what you think.' At that point I realised what he was basically saying: 'You're going to be out there grovelling, wanting to be accepted.' And I said, 'Ali, is it a matter of reject them before they reject you?' And he's like, 'Yes, basically.' And that's it. I'm going to get rejected, so, you know what? I'll reject them first. Everyone's racist. The country's terrible. All these things." So, Nor says, these young people end up thinking they're not really Somali, or Eritrean, and also don't see themselves as accepted in this country. "To go from that to radicalisation or joining a street gang, or carrying out robberies — you're halfway there."

In place of local identities, young people often adopt a global black identity, Nor says. The rise of Black Lives Matter in Australia is a striking example. "A lot of young people, if you come to the estate, they dress, talk, walk, everything, like African Americans. More recently, it's British rap. They mix American slang and British slang and I'm like, 'Am I getting old? I have no idea what you just said.' When we grew up, we used Australian terminology, Aussie slang.'

The online world is driving these changes. When Nor was a boy, there were no smart phones, the internet was still relatively peripheral to young lives. He and his friends were outside, playing sport, having scuffles, learning how to debate in groups. As they got older, the world radiated outwards: from the Flemington Flats, to public housing in North Melbourne and Carlton, to the city and state, to Australia and then, finally, the world. Today the direction is almost reversed: the online environment brings the world to young people first. "For them, from a very young age, everything is global. This happened in America. This happened in Finland. They will be online in a global Eritrean youth discussion group — kids of their own age and background but who have no idea what public housing is. Or they'll read of a shooting in America, or something that happened in South Africa, and they'll say, 'See, this is happening everywhere, this is how the world is.' And I'm like, 'Hold on, you can't take something in a completely different ecosystem and superimpose it on Melbourne, are you serious?' You create new things that don't really exist. So their access to information is very different. I think they'll have a big problem with this whole Facebook algorithm and echo chamber, where you just hear what you believe."

Farhio's teenage cousins living on the estate also seem more introverted than she was at their age. Yes, the girls still band together, attend mosque. But Farhio suspects they "aren't enjoying the things we enjoyed — sports, barbecues, community events, hanging in the park. They're much more into social media, into their appearance. They wear so much makeup."

Hiba says the young people "have illusions they don't belong, that we don't want them. People are destroying themselves in their own little corner." In the past, problems with youth were more visible, and communities were motivated to respond collectively, Hiba says. But the current approach to drug abuse and young people's immersion in angry online worlds is more hands-off. "Our community — Somali, Eritrean — doesn't discuss these issues enough," she says. "The parents are lost. Even our local mosques aren't talking about them."

Compared to 15 years ago police sirens are heard less frequently around inner-city estates. But Hamdi, the resident of the Carlton Flats, identifies tension between the men of his generation, who came to Australia as adults, and younger men, now in their 20s and 30s, who grew up here but take their cues from African-American culture, "seeing minute discrimination here and having this strong belief it's the same thing." That belief makes some young men turn inwards, convinced there's little point in studying and job-seeking because racism will inevitably hold them back.

Hamdi wants young people to learn what their parents suffered at home, the brutal dictatorships and even worse, lawlessness. (In Somalia, General Siad Barre ruled with arbitrary violence until 1991 when his overthrow triggered a prolonged civil war.)

Fathers struggle to tell their sons that because of such experiences, "they came to Australia very thankfully. Somalis are very nomadic; formal instruction hardly takes place. The younger person gets angry and starts putting their parents down — like Australian kids do," Hamdi chuckles. These differences, now spanning three generations, are marked. In Fitzroy, Anab says she knows of young Somali children being hit by their parents and going to the police station to make a complaint.

On the Flemington estate, gangsta rap incites rage against racist cops and corrupt authorities. "They're listening to rap music that's telling kids to take pills and hold guns, telling them their lives will change if they do drugs," Farhio says. Some boys succumb to the myth and their lives indeed change, but not for the better.

Hamdi says the Islamic prohibition against alcohol and drug use makes it hard to tackle a growing problem among young men. “One parent told me about a relative with an ice issue. He went to a rehabilitation place where there were a number of East African youths. But it’s very taboo, people won’t talk about it.”

The issue of problems going underground or online emerged when Nor and Ahmed advised the State Government about preventing crime and Islamist radicalisation. “There was this fear that imams are teaching it at mosques. No, it’s online. We said that every person that’s gone (to fight in Somalia or Syria), their parents and friends, everyone, tells you they were not engaged. They weren’t working or studying, not even part-time; not one of them was playing sports. They were at home, on the Internet and gaming a lot.” Nor says that the handful of Somali men from Sydney, Melbourne and Perth who went to Somalia to join the jihadi group, Al-Shabab, all came from the suburbs — none from inner city public housing. “And they were very isolated. They were in this bubble of frustration and anger and disappointment. And our advice was, ‘You want to prevent that? You want to prevent crime? Fund community sporting institutions.”

In 2009, Ahmed created the Australian Somali Football Association, an annual competition in the week around Christmas. Ten years later, it is still going. In front of up to 5000 spectators, eight teams from Melbourne and two from New Zealand face off on grounds in Melbourne’s inner-city, including at Debneys Park. The grand final is usually played at JJ Holland Park in Kensington. “It helps get kids off the street; they have to train, come on time,” Farhio says. “For a week and-a-half in a year everyone is united in one purpose. Young, old, babies, aunties, mums, everyone comes out.”

Similarly, in 2013, Nor helped to establish the Newmarket Phoenix soccer club, created to make competition soccer (and later basketball) affordable to low-income people in his area. The local club, Essendon Royals, charges $800 a year for a 13-year old player – an impossible rate for public housing families with many children. By raising money and winning sponsorships, the new club could charge $250 a year on a payment plan. To get the reduced rate, all players had to volunteer for three hours a month, removing graffiti, helping out on Australia Day and other festivals, and other tasks.

In late 2019, the club had planned to take a group of young players from the Flats on a bushwalking and camping trip. The bushfires forced its postponement until Easter. Then COVID-19 stopped the camp again.

COVID-19 overturns life in the Flats

When Australia began to go into different stages of lockdown earlier this year in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, social media fed rumours that were as infectious in the Flats as anywhere else. Coronavirus was deliberately engineered in a Wuhan lab; it spreads through 5G; is part of Bill Gates' secret plan to poison the population through mass vaccination — the conspiracy theories appeal to people of all ages on the Flemington estate. Nor says: "Some kids are out there saying, 'Black people can't get COVID-19.' I'm like, 'Where did you hear this?' 'It's on a YouTube clip.' I'm like, 'You know I can go home and make a YouTube clip!'"

"Mum was like, watch this video on WhatsApp," says Hiba. "A lot of it is fear: the government has a vaccine but they don't want to give it to people, that sort of thing. In the lift one day there was a lady wearing a mask. I wasn't. She was practically saying to me, 'Don't speak to me, I'll say hi to you when COVID passes.'

"I saw a video of someone in China eating a live rat; but you don't know how real it was, or how long ago it was," Farhio says. She's friends with a lot of Asians; the racist material has upset them. Nor has a couple of friends who are Uber drivers, "and they were like, 'We don't pick up Asians.' And I'm like, 'Hold on, mathematically, do you know what the percentage is that if you picked up an Asian person, that they're going to have COVID-19.' And 'when a white taxi driver doesn't want to pick you up at night because you're two black guys, that's exactly the same logic you're using right now. Don't become like the people that you don't like.'"

Speaking in May, well before the lockdown of his old home, Nor agreed there had been positives in this period. "Kids are home connecting with their parents a bit more. But still, a lot of parents are complaining, 'My kids are home, but they might as well not be here. They've got their headphones in. They're on the phone. They're in some chat group, they're in their room for four or five hours at a time.' My father was telling

us about a grandmother he saw online. Whenever her grandkids came over, she had a little bucket at the door, and they all had to put their phones in there, otherwise they couldn't get into her house."

Even before the weekend's lockdown, the pandemic had deepened a range of social ills in the flats. It has destroyed incomes, stopped access to public services, increased the withdrawal of already-isolated youth, created a pressure-cooker environment for the families with many children in three-bedroom flats, and crushed Flemington's exuberant communal life, including community sport.

Back in May, Hiba cited the now well-ventilated examples of authorities' alleged neglect of public housing tenants during the pandemic: dispensers empty of hand sanitiser within a week of being installed, too little public health information in community languages, a broken lift forcing tenants into closer proximity.

Education faced acute problems. Nor says that about a quarter of children at Debney Meadows Primary School, at the foot of the Flemington Flats, don't have an internet connection at home. "All of a sudden these kids were told, 'OK, you've got to study online.' Just something as simple as downloading and setting up Zoom — a lot of parents can't do that. So a lot of the kids are struggling. Remember that 90 per cent of kids don't have a desk at home, no room."

Organised religion has also been hit hard. Midday Friday prayers — "a massive big deal in our community," Hiba says — were cancelled as the mosque run from the headquarters of the Australian Muslim Social Services on Boundary Road closed its doors.

In May this year, the end-of-Ramadan Eid prayer came and went without the customary mass celebration in Debneys Park, normally attended by Somalis from all over the inner city and as far as Braybrook and Heidelberg. "Imagine having that taken away from you. I was anxious and sad," Farhio laments.

But potentially good news has come from this week's lockdown. In Flemington, Nor and Ahmed have worked closely with Andrew Crisp, the state's Emergency Services Commissioner who sits on their board, to address problems such as food delivery that have arisen in the lockdown. Nor says he has enjoyed generally good relations with the police over this period. When a young woman made an allegation of undue force used against her, Nor spoke with police officers, who calmly accepted the woman's right to make a complaint. In the chaos of this moment, one might miss small but vital signs that some elements of life in the Flats have quietly changed for the better.

Stepping up and speaking out

In April, just as the lockdown was closing businesses and forcing students to study from home, Anab Mohamud, the single mother from the Fitzroy Flats, took a job as a community liaison officer at Fitzroy Primary School just 200 metres from her home. She helps the school's many parents of Somali background who have moved into the Flats in recent years set up their children on the Compass online learning system; she also helps the children with their homework. She meets at the school with mothers, many of whom she knows from the Flats, and shows them how to use Compass. Others will talk to her only by phone. "They've got a paranoia about the virus, they don't want to go out, say they're scared of the air. I tell them it's not in the air. 'Go for a walk, get some exercise.'"

Anab now plans to take another step by running for Yarra Council as a Greens candidate in the local government elections in October. "I have a dream to be Prime Minister one day," she says with a laugh.

In Carlton, Hamdi plans to run as a Labor candidate in the same elections. For now, he remains secretary of the Carlton Public Housing Residents Association.

His flat now holds five children, aged 18 to two. His daughter, Ridwan, who turns 15 in July, was last year named most valuable player in her division for the Fitzroy Lions Soccer Club. She thinks she might want to be a doctor one day.

In 2018, after Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton accused "African gangs" of terrorising people in Melbourne, Awak Kongor worked closely with local hip-hop musician Titan Debirioun to publicly challenge what they saw as false and prejudiced portrayals of South Sudanese people in parts of the Australian media. The pair spoke out on a Four Corners episode entitled *Crime and Panic — Fear and race on the streets of Melbourne.*

In Flemington, tenants have protested the loss of car-parking and communal space to private apartments in the blueprint for redevelopment of the Flemington estate. When last year Moonee Valley Council voted to cut funding for a planned renewal of its faded community centre, Farhio says a petition went around the towers “like fire.”

Anisa Ali from North Melbourne works in a communications role at Indigenous Business Australia. She loves her job, in part because it enables her to connect with the Indigenous heritage of her grandfather, the Australian side of her make-up that she doesn’t yet know. When she sees the growing number of “mixed kids” like her, or African faces in advertising or on the side of buses, she feels optimistic about the future. “We're a lot more multicultural now, and I think Australia is embracing that more. It makes you feel recognised and acknowledged. When I was younger, it was like 'do people even see us?'" She also thinks police attitudes are slowly but gradually getting better, even if “I do think the general African doesn't see a police officer as someone that's on their side.”

Since the violence of 10 years ago, law enforcement and community leaders have worked to improve relations, and our interviewees say that views have softened on both sides. Local cops walked the Kokoda Trail alongside young Africans, and Victoria Police now has 26 officers from non-English speaking African backgrounds, after a targeted recruitment campaign was launched in 2018. Yet writing in *The Age* after the conflagration in the US over the police killing of unarmed black man George Floyd, lawyer Daniel Nguyen from the Flemington-Kensington Community Legal Centre’s Police Accountability Project argues that structural changes are still needed to ensure Africans aren’t being singled out by law enforcement. He wants any police officer who stops to question a member of the public to be required to issue a docket recording the rationale for the stop, and the person’s “perceived ethnicity.” This data, he says, should be provided to an independent monitoring body, and allegations of discriminatory policing must be independently investigated.

The aspirations of the people interviewed in this challenge stereotypes about public housing entrenching a permanent underclass. Despite their considerable disadvantages, young members of African communities in public housing have emerged as confident advocates for their people.

And older migrants, in particular, still see the Commission towers as home, village and refuge. Nor knows of people who moved out to the suburbs, felt too isolated, and were back in the Flats within a year. Farhio has told her parents that the family can afford a house in the western suburbs with a backyard. “But they don’t want to leave,

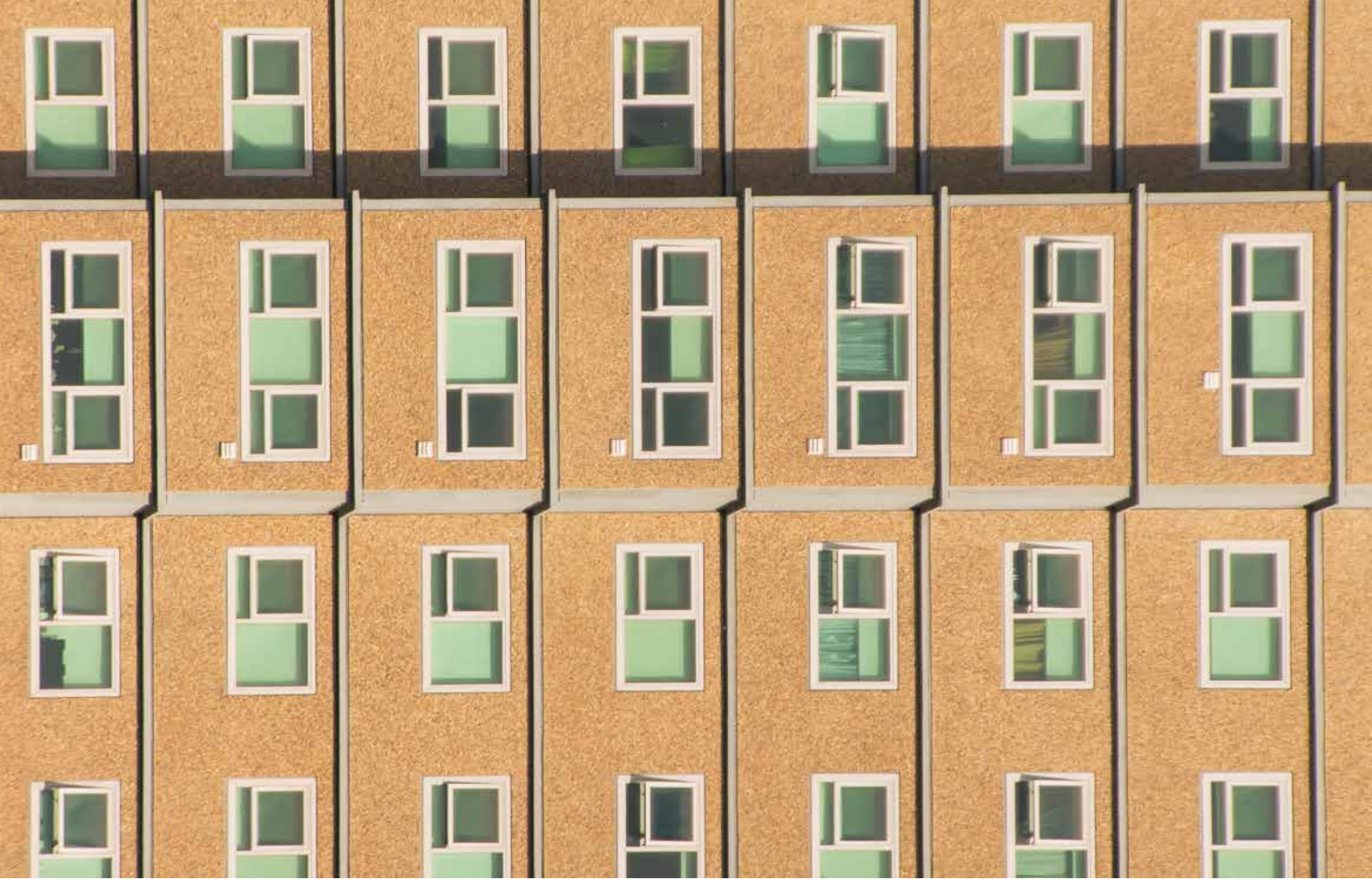
it's their safety. We've suggested to our parents: 'why don't we all get big houses near each other?' But no. We've even been offered a commission house — no."

"My parents raised five kids in public housing, on welfare," says Nor. "It gives you a different perspective on what's important. A lot my friends say, 'I want my children to have a much better life than me.' But on the other side, you know what? If we don't have a lot of money, that's what I'm actually used to, so I'll be OK. Even now, with the whole COVID thing, I realise that people who do have great jobs but have come from public housing say, 'It sucks, it's really bad, but I'll survive.'"

When we spoke with Nor in May, he said he was proud that his community, especially the older generation, had followed social distancing rules. Widespread awareness that African communities in Europe and America had experienced high infection rates had "really highlighted this sense that, 'Oh, we're so lucky to be in Australia. We're a part of this country.'" Similarly, Farhio said in May: "We are living in a country where we have a government that is able to stand up for us. They put all these lockdowns in place that allow us to have a better chance at life. I'm really proud to be Australian at the moment."

Despite her loyalty to the Flats, Farhio says, "when I do get a family of my own I want to start in a new place, start a new chapter." The children who grew up in the Commission towers are leaving them. That fact alone proves that public housing still works, still fulfils its function integrating new waves of arrivals. It's more than just a safety net, it's a road into Australia. And over time, in big and small ways, it is changing Australia, too.

Nor's sister, Ibtisam, has moved to Tarneit in the western suburbs with her Canadian husband. Although she no longer lives in public housing, she still makes him take food to the neighbours, Nor says. "He's uneasy – he says, 'Do you know how weird it is? They don't know you, and you want them to eat something you made?' And she's like, 'What do you mean? It's normal to send food to your neighbours. We've made cupcakes, send a few to the neighbours.' And you know what ends up happening… you do it a couple of times, they start sending food back. So the Aussie family across the street — he's a mechanic — always sends food back. And I remember when my sister had to explain to them, 'Listen, we're Muslims, halal and non-halal is an issue. Just don't send anything with meat in it.' And they were like, 'OK, no worries.' So they send cupcakes over, stuff like that. Now they text message each other, they house sit for each other. They're really close with all their neighbours now." ■



Finding space to fix things: the Carlton estate

CASE STUDY OF THE CARLTON ESTATE

by Julie Szego

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, most days Hamdi Ali could be found in his office on the ground floor of 510 Lygon Street, variously described as a workshop, office, counselling and advocacy centre, and IT help-desk. Hamdi helps African migrants navigate government bureaucracy, find services, get broadband into their flats, and generally solve problems in their lives. Having completed an RMIT course in network engineering, he also runs a computer exchange program, refurbishing donated computers with the latest software and selling them cheaply to low-income people.

"I even had to run citizenship classes from there after one woman came to me and said she had failed seven times. For someone not from this culture it's pretty hard to understand that the CEO of our country is the Queen."

On any view of it, Hamdi builds things. Speak to him long enough, though, and clear his startling optimism coexists with an undercurrent of frustration. The Carlton Flats community may be wired, the 47-year-old says, but they could be better connected.

Shortly after moving to Carlton, in the mid-2000s, Hamdi saw flyers for meetings of the long-established Carlton Housing Estates Residents Services, the residents' group. He started turning up, the only African who did so, despite the growing cohort of refugee families.

"At first I assumed the community don't come because they're not interested; then I realised it's more complicated," Hamdi explains. "They weren't being encouraged to get involved. I noticed how little Africans interacted with government and non-profit agencies; the lack of communication and understanding."

He thought the bureaucracy was slow to recognise that as the complexion of tenants was changing so were their needs. They needed tailored social services and programs to overcome the poverty, trauma and disrupted schooling that are among the long-term impacts of war and displacement. They needed new kinds of support, delivered in a new way.

More than a decade later, most of North Carlton's residents are of Asian ancestry, followed by Somalian and English ancestry, with a relatively small proportion born in Australia. Much has improved, Hamdi acknowledges. But basic cultural misunderstandings persist.

Not long after he started attending the residents' meetings, Hamdi, along with "another Aussie," took over leadership of the group. The timing was auspicious.

The State Government was embarking on an ambitious redevelopment of the two precincts on Lygon and Elgin Streets. From 2009, residents were temporarily relocated as the high-rises were renovated, three of the worn out "walk-up" units were demolished, and, controversially, part of the land was sold off to developers for private apartments. This last measure was pitched as a "social mix" experiment to integrate public housing tenants with new and richer neighbours; critics saw it as a short-sighted plan to save the Government money.

While the building works disrupted tenants' lives, Hamdi remembers this period as a time when tenants' voices were better heard. Authorities made an effort to keep them on board through an MP-chaired community liaison committee. Senior bureaucrats visited the estate at least monthly, Hamdi told a 2018 parliamentary inquiry into the renewal program, and responded effectively to residents' concerns, even those unrelated to the redevelopment. (By contrast, a 2018 paper by three academics who interviewed Carlton residents about their experiences of relocation found the tenants "felt powerless" throughout the re-development, their role largely reduced to choosing between pre-determined options about design matters and not about services.)

The public housing renewal program — which is ongoing in Melbourne's inner-city — is designed to increase the number of social housing units by 10 per cent. Yet in Carlton, because smaller apartments replaced many three-bedroom units, some 40 per cent of tenants, mostly families, did not return. Those who did return encountered vastly improved spaces, along with the odd water leak and dodgy heating unit. At the 510 Lygon Street estate in the summer of 2011, social life flourished, Hamdi recalls. Children played in the new parks till 10 at night.

Families milled around the landscaped barbecue area. A wedding was held in the community room. A satisfied resident told researchers studying the social impact of the relocation: “A lot of people don’t even know that this ministry (public housing) is here.” Others, by contrast, feared that everything new would be old again, crushed by the forces of poverty and disaffection. One resident complained the walls were blackening because people still “smoked drugs in the stairs.”

As for the experiment in integration, which had envisaged a “salt and pepper” mix of public and private dwellings in the same buildings, the results invite scepticism. Melbourne University researchers found that all the new buildings had been separated according to public or private tenancy, with separate entrance halls and parking lots and no spaces common to both. A retaining wall stands between one public housing complex and a neighbouring private block. Some private residents on Lygon and Rathdowne Streets have exclusive access to a courtyard; public tenants watch them using it from their balconies. The estate even has two cafes, one patronised by the rich, the other by the poor, wrote *The Age* journalist Clay Lucas.

Hamdi shrugs good-naturedly at this criticism. Sure, new migrants had a lot to gain from informal interactions with some “typical Aussie” neighbours. On the other hand, people are busy; even in suburban settings fewer people these days chat over the fence.

Nine other public housing estates around Melbourne are slated for redevelopment according to the same public-private funding model.

Perhaps the most insidious barrier between public housing tenants and the public isn’t physical. Bureaucracy governs tenants’ lives in a way that sets them apart from neighbours outside the estate. Victoria’s Office of Housing, which sits within the Department of Health and Human Services, is effectively the landlord — allocating, maintaining and administering the properties through its local branches and area managers. Hamdi says the residents group has forged positive relationships with various housing officers over the years. But there’s a structural problem stemming from the Office’s simultaneous ubiquity and remoteness in tenants’ lives. “The problem is they just look after the property. It’s not their job to look after the welfare of the people.”

Hamdi says the impact of this control can lead to discrimination, and make other bodies less accountable. For example, when he has approached Melbourne City Council with problems, say about parking permits, the response comes via the Office

of Housing. Candidates for municipal elections rarely campaign at the estate — a failure he's rectifying by standing as a candidate in this year's municipal elections.

Between residents and bureaucrats is a tangle of other agencies, community groups and churches who tender to manage both the estate's communal spaces and grant-funding for a myriad of programs and services. Hamdi has nicer things to say about the work of some of these entities than others. The agencies themselves admit they face tough competition for finite grants from an already limited funding pool. A May report on improving outcomes for apartment residents by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute cites one agency manager who says his organisation could only address about a quarter of the demand for English language and employment assistance programs.

Hamdi suspects that the Department (DHHS) prefers dealing with estate residents through agency "middlemen," which sometimes leads to the poorer decisions. It also leaves little room for self-help.

Take female residents, the targets of many well-intentioned health initiatives. Devout women simply won't attend exercise sessions at council-run facilities if they are mixed gender, "and especially when you reduce your clothing." So, an exasperated Hamdi argues, why not try cheap and accessible solutions, such as gardening sessions on the estate? The unused undercrofts in the high-rises could easily host makeshift gyms.

And how to kindle the much-needed "formal" conversations between fathers and sons, which Hamdi hopes might ease intergenerational tensions? First, where might they gather? The Eritreans "come together in community spaces more than others." Somalis prefer restaurants and cafes off the estate.

Shortly after becoming leader of the residents group, Hamdi found himself signing a $40,000 grant application for a Men's Shed, which would be open to all the neighbourhood. He wasn't entirely sure what he was applying for, but the process was already in train. The Men's Shed is a federal health initiative, mostly targeting older men out of the workforce and vulnerable to isolation and depression; instead of men retreating to their garages with a Black & Decker, perhaps they could be encouraged to bond with other men in a communal workshop. It is a laudable, and successful program, but was a Men's Shed the best fit for Carlton's African men, more inclined to commune over a pot of spicy tea than over wood shavings? Still, Hamdi was persuaded the space could be adapted for the estate's needs.

Yet as Hamdi found himself negotiating its intended use with authorities, the shed was a flashpoint for wider conflicts, some structural, some petty and personal. Turf wars with outside agencies and providers saw its doors bolted shut for about six months. A local reverend complained to the Department that Hamdi was "verbally abusing" one of his flock in the shed and demanded his removal as secretary of the residents' group. Hamdi denied the allegations in a Statutory Declaration, which he issued to everyone concerned. A punch was thrown at one of Hamdi's colleagues. (The assailant, a person from outside the estate, later pleaded guilty to assault.)

These days the Men's Shed hosts a women's sewing group. Some young men wander down for a game of Ludo. But the older men are wary. Hamdi sees in this bewildering saga a lesson about ensuring residents have a sense of ownership over what happens on their home ground.

"When people don't understand what something is for they can't appreciate it. We (Africans) come from authoritarian regimes, and when you don't like the way something is done you don't say your opinion. And when the dispute is with the government… they just avoid the whole thing."

Still, were it not for the shed, Hamdi might never have met lawyer Ian Cunliffe. A Carlton local and former senior public servant, Cunliffe ambled into the shed about 10 years ago in search of hand tools and company. He missed out on the former, and lucked out with the latter.

"I found it wasn't much of a shed. But I met Hamdi. And he had all these legal problems with the residents' association, with tax and GST, with the Office of Housing."

It was the start of not only a beautiful friendship — and occasional crusade — but also Cunliffe's pro-bono servicing of residents' unmet demand for legal services. He says the matters "are many and varied — robodebt, problems with the taxi commission, telcos, banks. I reckon I have about a 95 per cent success rate. Many of the problems are legally quite simple."

The root causes of poverty and disadvantage are harder to crack. Jobs are the key, say Hamdi and every sensible observer. Young Africans need to see people who look like them getting ahead.

Even someone with Hamdi's drive knows how hard the challenges can be. He came to Australia nearly 30 years ago, aged 18, with only two years of primary school and three years religious education in a refugee camp in Somalia . After six months of migrant education, he enrolled in the adult stream at Collingwood Secondary College. They wanted him to repeat Year 10. "I said, 'No way, I want to go straight to uni.'" He completed Year 11 and Year 12, and enrolled in an electronics engineering course at Collingwood TAFE. "I still had a few subjects to finish, but I was driving taxis and doing deliveries. I just wanted to get more and make a dollar."

After several years detour, he returned successfully to studies, though before COVID he was juggling his running the computer exchange and the resident's group with Uber driving to pay the bills.

Unlike the previous generations of migrants who walked straight into factory jobs, in a post-manufacturing economy even semi-skilled workers must have a resume and sell themselves. That's intimidating, Hamdi says, for kids raised in non-English speaking households, where parents lack formal education, connections and cultural capital — and that's even before well-documented discrimination in the employment market. The effect can be long-term de-skilling and halting integration into mainstream society.

"You see a lot of people go for taxi driving...where someone they know is doing it and tells them what they need to do and they don't have to perform to someone like they would for office jobs," Hamdi says. ""Australians can talk themselves up without feeling like they're bragging or doing anything unusual. Even I have to rehearse to myself that it's a normal thing to talk myself up."

Again, employment-assistance services are many — and that fragmentation might be part of the problem. Some programs specifically target public housing tenants. But even these programs can be geographically and culturally distant from the estate residents.

The better programs yield jobs residents can see. Hamdi praises a Brotherhood of St Laurence program that trains residents to work as security guards while providing a concierge and security service on housing estates. The Public Tenant Employment Program has helped young men gain a foothold in the construction industry through working on building projects on the estates. These men helped their friends get jobs too.

Hamdi thinks it would help significantly to have employment programs on the estate. Homework clubs, too. Kids need them; many parents are too busy, or their English too limited, to help with schoolwork. Space and devices are in short supply, large families make homes noisy. Even before coronavirus, the libraries weren't always open. For a time the Church of All Nations — one of two churches ministering to the Lygon estate — ran a productive homework club in its hall, but Hamdi says "there can be a bit of inhibition around (Muslim kids) visiting a church."

The estate's annual Harmony Day festivities provide a trivial but telling example of the paternalistic conceit bureaucracies sometimes indulge in. Managed by local agencies and the council using federal government funds, the event — which includes food stalls and jumping castles — is staged with no involvement from residents.

"None at all," Hamdi insists. "Actually, one year a resident set up a rival community barbecue between the high rises to embarrass them (the organisers)."

Another Harmony Day ended in controversy when a church group distributed evangelical pamphlets to some Muslim kids. The parents were alarmed. "So it wasn't very harmonious," Cunliffe, the lawyer, says wryly.

Hamdi argues the very concept is patronising in a community where basically every day is "harmony day." He says he's seen agencies referring to the potential for sectarian conflict on the estates when seeking funding from the government.

Perhaps Hamdi's depiction of a socially cohesive estate is too rosy. Yet there's very little evidence to the contrary: post-relocation studies of Carlton's residents have turned up the odd remark from a tenant admitting to avoiding Africans because they had nothing in common. Such sentiments aren't ideal, but hardly indicative of impending race riots.

Unsurprisingly, Hamdi views COVID-19 as an opportunity for a reset. Once the federal stimulus packages expire, effective employment and education programs will be an urgent priority as "a lot of people have lost their jobs." What better catalyst for bringing scrutiny to use of space on the estate, and who gets to use it — and whether enough is being done to build residents' capacity to decide their own needs.

As for the generational stand-offs, Hamdi has already seen changes for the better. "The family has bonded. I am often hearing men are not involved in the family; now a lot of the men are literally forced to be at home, hopefully there will be more interaction, it's a positive."

About the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute exists as a bridge between academic insight and public thought, undertaking research to help Australia advance as a welcoming, prosperous and cohesive nation, particularly where this relates to the transition of migrants into Australian society.

In doing so, the Institute links thought to action to ensure informed debate drives the agenda, and empowers the critical thinking that will help drive Australia's social cohesion forward.

The Applied Research Centre forms a key part of the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, translating research and resources relevant to social cohesion into practical insights.

Through twice-yearly narratives, events, learning programs and considered explanations of research, the Applied Research Centre provides tools, information and innovations that empower individuals and organisations to strengthen cohesion in their communities.

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