

# Carol Schwartz transforms CFMEU building into not-for-profit hub

By **Tim Boreham**  
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Backed by prominent company director, philanthropist and Rich Lister Carol Schwartz, the erstwhile digs of one of the country's most militant unions is being transformed into a purpose built hub for not-for-profit organisations and social enterprises.

Formerly housing burly CFMEU officials, the building at 552 Victoria Street in North Melbourne has been renovated with an emphasis on "gender friendly, socially inclusive and collaborative co-working space" and renamed Our Community House.



Our Community chair and investor Carol Schwartz in front of a mural by street artist David Lee Pereira commissioned for Our Community House. LINDSAY GOLDBERG

Ms Schwartz's family company Trawalla Group last May acquired the 2765 square metre building for around \$15 million, at least \$2 million above the reserve.

On the corner of Curzon St, the double-storey building previously sold for \$6.289 million in April 2009.

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Ms Schwartz is the chair of Our Community, which includes the SmartyGrants grants distribution platform and the Institute of Community Directors Australia.

Ms Schwartz is also a director of the listed property trust Stockland and sits on the Reserve Bank of Australia's board.

The anchor tenant for Our Community House, Our Community vacated a smaller site in nearby Stanley Street. Capable of housing 400 workers, Our Community House is expected to attract "progressive organisations of all types."



Carol Schwartz's not-for-profit group Our Community has taken over the CFMEU's headquarters.

Ms Schwartz said the project was inspired by a trade mission to Israel that visited numerous co-working spaces. "That started a conversation about how fabulous it would be to have a space in Melbourne focused on what the community and social sectors really need," she said.

"We talked about it a little bit more and then the hunt was on. Finding the right building in the right location was quite a challenge and it took us six months, but we feel we have found the perfect building."

Despite the prospect of generating 'social dividends' Ms Schwartz said Trawalla would strive for a commercial return on rental income, "but what's market for us might be different to someone else."

Organisations signing up so far include the car share provider Car Next Door, the rural support agency Aussie Farmers Foundation and an existing tenant, the disability employment agency WISE.

Designed by all-female architects firm Studio Tate, Our Community House inclusive flourishes such as parenting rooms and gender-friendly signage on the toilets.

In keeping with the vibe, the meeting rooms are names after feminist activists including former Victorian premier Joan Kirner, disability activist Stella Young, women's suffrage pioneer Vida Goldstein and poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (also known as Kath Walker).

The facility also includes what's claimed to be the country's first social innovation data science and communications lab, "designed to bring Australia's social sector safely and productively into the data era."

In nearby Kensington, Impact Investment Group is redeveloping the historic Younghusband woolstores as a creativity hub for small enterprises with a sustainability focus.

Despite their community ethos, the projects don't entail collective ownership in the same way as Ross House at 247 Flinders Lane in the CBD, a long standing magnet for not-for-profit bodies.

The five storey heritage building is owned by users via the Ross House Association. "They have been fantastic, a long time leader in this space," Ms Schwartz said.