How lucky we are to have been on the Institute’s Awards Panel over the 2011-2012 awards cycle, an ongoing process started by the AHI as far back as 2005. With six Panel members from Australian States and Territories, and New Zealand, it was a real privilege to examine a record number of submissions with different stories of vision, courage, support, persistence, hard work, cooperation and trust. Truly inspiring!

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Finalists from each jurisdiction are automatically entered in the Australasian Awards, traditionally presented every second year to coincide with the Australian National Housing Conference. Awards go to housing professionals who are judged to have made a significant and lasting difference to tenants or service users, to their community, to their colleagues and to their profession.

2011-2012 Awards

Over the years, the categories have changed, though there has always been a mix of prizes for housing staff, organisational excellence and the contribution of tenants. In 2010, the Awards categories were updated to further recognise sustainability principles, and projects that encourage innovation.

The six 2011-12 Awards categories were:
- Inspirational Colleague Award and Outstanding Achievement Award for individuals,
- Leading Innovation Award, Leading Practice Award and Leading Housing Solutions Award for housing teams, and
- Tenant-led Initiative Award for individuals or teams.

We were delighted to receive an incredible 99 nominations, an all-time record for the AHI. Around half the submissions were from NSW, with the next biggest set of entries from South Australia, followed by New Zealand and Western Australia. With the less populous Australian States and Territories, the numbers of nominations were understandably modest. Therefore, the ACT, Northern Territory and Tasmanian nominations were combined with their more populous neighbours.

There was a slightly more even spread of nominations across categories. Most popular was Inspirational Colleague (23 entries), followed by Leading Innovation and Leading Practice (both 19 entries). There were fewer nominations for Tenant-led initiative, though they tended to all be of a very high quality.

NSW nominations in the current Awards reflect the growth of community housing organisations and sector scale in NSW. The high number of entries was boosted by a concerted effort in NSW public housing to support the Awards. Of the NSW entries, there was an even split between community housing and public sector staff and organisations.

### 2011-12 Award Australasian finalists, highly commended finalists and winners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award Category</th>
<th>NSW &amp; ACT</th>
<th>New Zealand</th>
<th>Queensland &amp; NT</th>
<th>South Australia</th>
<th>Victoria &amp; Tasmania</th>
<th>Western Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outstanding Achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Natalie McDonald, Qu Dept Housing &amp; Public Works</td>
<td>Jude Allen, Housing SA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inspirational Colleague</td>
<td>Phyliss Meadows, Wentworth Comm. Housing</td>
<td>Vicki McLaren, Wellington City Council</td>
<td>Jane Fletcher, Housing SA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leading Innovation</td>
<td>Work Ventures NSW</td>
<td>Housing Upgrade Project Team, Wellington City Council</td>
<td>Solar PV Project Team, Housing SA</td>
<td>Kids Under Cover</td>
<td>Warnum Recovery Project Team, Dept Housing WA</td>
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<td>Leading Housing Solutions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Aboriginal Housing Service &amp; Community Const. Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leading Housing Practice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Canterbury Team, HNZ Corporation</td>
<td>TEAM Health Community Housing. (NT)</td>
<td>Office of Social Housing Coordinator Housing SA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenant-led Initiatives</td>
<td>Tenant Advisory Group St George Comm. Housing</td>
<td>Tenant art project – WACHA, Wellington</td>
<td>Henry Street Garden Club, Bric Housing (QLD)</td>
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> Mark Singer and Tony Gilmour reveal the mechanics behind the awards process.

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In many ways, the Awards mirror the changes in the sector. Community housing organisations are becoming increasingly innovative, particularly in jurisdictions where they have grown in scale. Over the last year, public housing authorities have remained strong in South Australia and Western Australia, though underwent re-structuring in NSW as assets were split from service delivery. In both Victoria and Queensland, uncertainty remains over how public housing will be restructured. The spectre of job losses has not been conducive to high numbers of Awards nominations.

The Awards Panel noted the 2011-2012 nominations showed the innovation and energy around service provision and tenant led initiatives. A number of awarded projects were from less mainstream housing providers such as welfare organisations and local councils. There were noticeably fewer asset-related nominations, perhaps reflecting less capital construction in social housing in both Australia and New Zealand.

The Institute’s 2011-12 Australasian Awards held during the Brisbane Conference in early November 2012 saw a wide-ranging group of social housing projects and people receive awards and, in such a big field, a significant number of highly commended finalists. The Panel at times exercised discretion as to which category the nomination was best-suited – more an art than a science.

The Australasian Awards were characterised by good levels of community housing representation, and a wide range of social housing projects and programs. Standouts include a number of New Zealand nominations that addressed responses to the Christchurch earthquakes, and the innovative social housing commitments of Wellington City Council, community groups and tenants. The quality and energy found in the New Zealand entries may well be linked to the resilience of the sector over decades of sector restructuring and other natural disasters.

South Australia, with its long history of social housing innovation and government support, fared well in the Australasian Awards, based on the diversity and quality of nominations. Some exciting projects in Western Australia and Northern Territory working with indigenous communities were rewarded, and Queensland’s progressive social policies under the previous Government saw a number of excellent projects highlighted.

Although the high levels of NSW nominations reflected a consolidation phase in social housing activities, and an interest in improving housing systems, there were fewer finalists in the Australasian Awards. After a long period of innovation and expenditure on social housing, the current NSW Government has housing policy on hold. Interestingly, it was the tenant led initiatives that were most prominent in NSW, perhaps a pointer for future trends in treating our residents as valued customers.

The 2011-12 Awards reflected a number of unfamiliar and one-off influences affecting social housing. These influences include environmental factors such as the Christchurch earthquake, floods, energy price rises and challenges with environmental sustainability. Nominations for excellent work in these areas by housing professionals remind us that we provide shelter – a fundamental human need.

**Complexity and change**

The AHI Awards are increasingly highlighting the range of skills and expertise required in the housing profession.

The housing profession is becoming more diverse. In part, this is due to a range of new roles and responsibilities passing to housing providers, such as community building, asset repairs, tenant skill development and finding pathways into employment. We now work in an environment where housing organisations offer ‘housing plus’. This requires professionals in the sector to be multi-skilled, and to constantly need to update their expertise.

As complexity increases, the role of the AHI becomes more central.

**The Awards in perspective**

State and National Awards events are the primary social occasions for networking and interaction within the social housing profession. These are times where the social housing sector is celebrated and its achievements recognised. This is particularly important in an environment where funding is being restricted, re-structuring continuing, and redundancies loom.

Awards events have evolved with State branches recommending venues and event programs, and the virtual AHI Head Office arranging logistics, awards presentations, promotional material and payments. In the next year, there are plans for further changes:

- We will move to an annual awards cycle, with 2012-2013 seeing a single Awards event at the National Housing Conference in Adelaide. In 2013-2014 we will return to the individual heats process.
- The awards categories will be further developed to make selecting the award category more straightforward.
- By popular request, the nomination form will be considerably simplified.

We on the Awards Panel are privileged to view a snapshot of social housing activities in each State, Territory and New Zealand. The Awards have evolved, highlighting a sector shift over the last decade primarily from public housing to a broader social housing family of community housing, indigenous housing and affordable housing. With this shift, an explosion of innovative projects reflects the resilience of the sector in the face of continuing change and sector restructuring.

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Dr Tony Gilmour is a housing consultant, research fellow at Swinburne University and AHI President.

He helped facilitate early consultation on national regulation, and is a member of the NSW Housing Regulator’s advisory forum. The views expressed in this article are his own.

Mark Singer worked as an architect and design manager in the private sector, and from 1985 in design, asset policy and asset development roles in public housing. Since 1999, he has been focusing on environmental sustainability policy issues of social housing and climate change.

After retirement, Mark enrolled in a PhD at Swinburne University researching resilience in the social housing system, and enjoys his involvement with the NSW Branch of the AHI.