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## Melbourne's Cairo Flats: A Timeless Model of Compact, Community-Centered Living

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Nestled discreetly behind a leafy garden on Nicholson Street in Fitzroy, Melbourne, the Cairo Flats stand as an early and enduring example of modernist apartment living. Designed by architect Acheson Best Overend and completed in 1936, this two-storey, U-shaped complex offers 26 studio and 10 one-bedroom flats arranged around a shared communal garden, demonstrating how clever design and a community spirit can transform small living spaces into desirable homes.

The Cairo Flats were among Melbourne's first "minimum flats," compact apartments designed to maximize amenity within modest footprints, most measuring around 24 square meters. At a time when Australia was experiencing rapid urbanisation and evolving social needs, these flats responded innovatively by offering residents not just private living quarters, but also communal dining rooms and in-house meal and laundry services. This approach fostered a strong sense of neighbourliness and shared living that remains appealing nearly 90 years later.

Open House Melbourne executive director and chief curator Tania Davidge highlights the enduring success of the Cairo Flats: "They offer more than simply a place to live. They create a sense of community through opportunities to casually meet your neighbours, on the stairs, in the garden, or a wave across balconies." The thoughtful design goes beyond the interior, contributing positively to Fitzroy's historic streetscape with warm materials, careful detailing, and generous landscaping.

One of the flats open to the public during this year's Open House is owned by Nic Agius, of Agius Scorpo Architects, who has carefully restored and adapted his studio flat into a one-bedroom home. Agius preserved the original high ceilings and "good bones" of Overend's design while introducing clever space-saving features like a fold-out kitchen inspired by Le Corbusier's minimalist summer cabin, Cabanon. This blend of original architecture and modern ingenuity exemplifies how the Cairo Flats continue to inspire compact living solutions.

Agius's experience also underscores the human element that defines the Cairo Flats community. He recalls an elderly neighbour who embodied the spirit of the place, a reminder that these small apartments can support vibrant lives across generations. With housing affordability and urban density challenges still prominent today, the Cairo Flats offer valuable lessons in designing spaces that prioritize both individual comfort and communal connection, a balance often missing in contemporary developments.

As Melbourne continues to grow and evolve, the legacy of the Cairo Flats stands as a blueprint for sustainable, community-oriented urban living, proving that good design and neighbourly spirit can create homes that last nearly a century without losing their appeal.