

Publication Date: January 30, 2018
YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 097. Why NABERS is a game changer for the residential property market

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Intro: Welcome to Your Strata Property. The podcast for property owners looking for reliable, accurate, and bite-sized information from an experienced and authoritative source. To access previous episodes and useful strata tips, go to www.yourstrataproperty.com.au.

Amanda Farmer: Hello, and welcome! I'm Amanda Farmer, and this is Your Strata Property. Carlos Flores leads the National Australian Built Environment Rating System, also known as NABERS, one of Australia's most successful sustainability initiatives. NABERS is a government-run sustainability rating system which is at the heart of Australia's environmental policy for the commercial property sector. Carlos is responsible for all aspects of the delivery of NABERS. I am absolutely delighted to welcome Carlos Flores of NABERS. Welcome, Carlos.

Carlos Flores: Thank you, Amanda. I'm really excited to be on the show.

Amanda Farmer: Pleasure to have you. Now, I was privileged to listen to your presentation at the Griffith University Conference back in September, and you told us all about NABERS, and this was an acronym that I think a lot of us had heard bandied around a bit lately. We know it has something to do with property, maybe it has something to do with strata property, sustainability, energy efficiency, environmental friendliness. That's all stuff that we talk about a lot on the podcast, so when I heard you at Griffith talking about NABERS, there was something different, something different about NABERS that other sustainability initiatives around Australia don't seem to have tapped into yet, so I wanted you to come on the podcast, Carlos, and have a chat with us about that. And I'm going to ask you straight up, what is it that makes NABERS different to other sustainability initiatives?

Carlos Flores: Yes. So, that's a question I get a lot in recent months, and I've been thinking about, over the last few months, on how to explain it a bit better, and I think the main difference between NABERS and, perhaps, other sustainability rating schemes in Australia is that most of them have specialised on individual units, so, mostly detached houses, and it's a little bit like when, if you want to buy a skateboard, or bicycle, or other transport devices that is on the small end of the scale, you're actually focusing on the features of those bicycles. So, you want to look at what kind of wheels you have, what kind of gears, how many gears, do you have a basket or not, that's the kind of thing that you look for, the features of that, and that's what a lot of the schemes like NatHERS and BASICS and other schemes that work at that level do.

They look at what kind of windows do you have, what kind of insulation do you have, and the problem is that when you get into bigger buildings, houses or an apartment building, for example, it's much more like a rocket or a plane than it is a bicycle or a skateboard. It's made of many, many parts, a lot of equipment, and it's made out of systems that need to work together well to deliver the services to people in the apartment. So, what we do as a program is that we don't look at buildings like bicycles or skateboards. We look at them as airplanes or rockets. We look at the systems that you have in your building. How do you deliver hot water? How do you deliver air condition? How do you deliver your lifts and your car parks, and it's all about how do you deliver the best systems you have for the lowest amount of energy and the lowest amount of water.

So, when you're being certified under NABERS, what you get is, it's a star rating between 1 and 6 stars, and what the star rating means is that ... A building that gets a 3-star rating is a building that is using about an average amount of use compared to similar buildings in the same city. If you get a star rating of 1 star, it means you're using a lot more energy than the average building in your city. And if you get 5 or 6 stars, it means that you're really sustainable, that you're really using 50, 60, 70% less energy than a lot of buildings in that city. So, getting a NABERS rating and a good score in NABERS means that your building really is sustainable, that the systems in that building are all operating really well to deliver the services that people need.

Amanda Farmer: So, you're not about features so much. You're not about, let's say, solar panels, or shower heads, or light fittings. You're more about measuring the outcome and the results. And buildings may have those features, but it's about looking at what the output, then, is because of the effective use of those features. Is that a fair summary?



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Carlos Flores: It's absolutely right. And, before I joined NABERS a few years ago, I used to work in solar energy, and I've seen a lot of solar panels in the top of buildings that were never maintained, that are not working anymore, and solar panels that are not operating on the roof are just as good as not having solar panels at all. It's not doing anything to help your building be more sustainable, so if your building can reduce a lot of energy by just turning lights off, or by putting in the shiniest solar panels, or by just having better systems that operate a little bit better, we don't care. We just look straight at the power bill, and we say, are you really using less energy? Do you really have lower emissions? Are you really using less water? And that's what we actually reward under NABERS.

Amanda Farmer: Now, NABERS is government-run, so do you fall under the state government here in New South Wales? Where, exactly, do you sit?

Carlos Flores: We are a national program. It is run by the New South Wales Office of Environment and Heritage, but we respond to a board where we have members from all states, all territories, and the chair of that board is the Australian government.

Amanda Farmer: Okay. And NABERS has been involved in commercial properties for some time now, is that right?

Carlos Flores: Yes. We've been in this space for about 19 years now. We're turning 20. And a lot of our work has been on commercial buildings, and I think it's fair to say that NABERS has played a central role to make some buildings like offices and shopping centres ... Australia has been a world leader in that space, and NABERS is a big part of why that's happened. If you look at the office sector today, most buildings have NABERS ratings, they disclose them every year, and they improve every year. Seen so many hundreds of buildings reducing power bills by 40, 50, 60%, and that's partly because people have NABERS ratings, and they know how well they're performing. They know how much better they could be doing if they put a bit more time on improving.

Amanda Farmer: And when you say they disclose these ratings, how do they do that?

Carlos Flores: There's a legislation that is run by the Australian government, it's called the Commercial Building Disclosure Act, and basically the way it works is that if you want to rent a space in an office, you need to have a NABERS rating before you can do that, and when you're advertising your space outside of your building or on the internet, you actually need to tell people how efficient that building is. And so, in 2010 many people had never had a NABERS rating before, they came into the program, and they found out for the first time that their building was actually really inefficient, that they could save probably 30, 40, 50% in power bills by putting a little bit of time, a little bit of effort, sometimes a little bit of capital but not always, and in that period of time, the last 7 years, we've seen so many buildings just responding to ... Just finding out how efficient you are can drive a lot of people to take action.

Amanda Farmer: It's really interesting that in the commercial properties space that's mandated by legislation. Can you tell us what's happening in the residential property space and how NABERS is now moving into residential strata schemes?

Carlos Flores: Absolutely. I think that one of the problems that we've had for a long time in the residential building space is that much of the policy is driven by states. So, every state has different policies for new buildings and for existing buildings, and it's been really hard to get common policies that work in a similar manner across the country. And it's all well and good if all companies that work in Sydney were based in Sydney, but as you well know, many companies that develop and construct and design buildings are national companies that operate all across the country, and so they have to learn legislation and policy on every state, and it gets really complex.

So, we've heard the Property Council and bodies like the Australian Sustainable Built Environment Council asking, for many years now, to have more national policy and national programs that can cover in the same way buildings in Victoria and buildings in Queensland, in Perth, in Sydney, and so what we're trying to do is basically create a national certification scheme that any building can do, it doesn't matter where you are in Australia, and that could be used for disclosure purposes in the future, but it could also be used by people who are running buildings right now really well.

There's a lot of people in high-rise apartments who have put quite a bit of time and effort into making their buildings more efficient,

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and right now they don't really have any way to be recognised for that, and that's what NABERS is all about. If you are really using less energy, you can get a NABERS certification, which is relatively low cost, and you can promote that to people who are buying and renting that space.

Amanda Farmer: So, is that something that residential strata buildings can do now, get a NABERS certification?

Carlos Flores: That is something that we're going to be able to do in about 8 months. We're in the middle of the development phase, and people who are really keen ... In every market, Amanda, there's always people who are passionate, and they're at the forefront of sustainability, and we've seen a lot of apartment buildings already in this process, you know, doing a lot of work on solar energy and more sustainable waste. And so, the tool is going to be launched in June, and it means that any building after that can be certified in NABERS across Australia, but if you're really keen on being involved before, we're going to be doing targeted pilots in 4 or 5 cities in different states around between March and April, so anyone who is interested in being one of those first buildings getting certified can maybe get in a bit of local media and attention to their efforts, we'd be very happy to work with them.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, fabulous. I'll ask you at the end of our conversation, Carlos, to give me a link, or a website, or some details where our listeners can go if they want to be part of that pilot, and they can check out the show notes, and click through to that.

Carlos Flores: Perfect.

Amanda Farmer: Now, you've mentioned, there, Carlos, some buildings that are doing really well with improving their sustainability. In your experience being involved with buildings who are trying to achieve these aims, what are the problems, what are the stumbling blocks that you've seen some of them face, and how have they overcome those?

Carlos Flores: A lot of the problems that you see in high rise apartment buildings are very similar to the problems you see in some of the other markets that we're in. So, when you look at an apartment building, the common space in those buildings is so much more similar to an office building or a shopping centre than it is to an individual house. You have air conditioning, you have heating, you have lifts and car parks, and so the number one problem that you're always going to see in a complex machine like that is about how those parts work together. So, we see a lot of, in apartment buildings, a lot of equipment operating when nobody is using it, and that's probably the number one problem that you will see, but the important thing to remember is that this is not a problem about apartment buildings. This is in general. We see that in offices, and we've seen a lot of people doing something about it, and been able to get a lot of savings for a very small amount of money by just looking at what things can we turn off when nobody's using them? That's probably the number one cheapest and biggest opportunity in apartment buildings.

Having said that, there's opportunities everywhere. There's a lot of people that, if you want to look at car parks, you can see, how can you work with fans to ventilate more or less a car park when it's being used more or less, the same with lighting in car parks. If you want to look at heating, there's a lot of heating systems ... People who live in apartments do have patterns for when they use showers, for example. You see a lot of people having showers in the morning or late in the evening but less people having showers in the middle of the day and in the middle of the night, so that's an opportunity to dial up or down some systems to match that.

So, some of this work can be quite complex, but I think that some of the really exciting things that we've seen in the last maybe 3 or 4 years is the rise of a lot of startups that work in the space of putting a few sensors that are relatively low cost in a lot of places in your building, and helping you to identify zero-dollar opportunities to save energy, or things that you can do for a very small amount of money, to begin with.

Amanda Farmer: Some of the guests on our podcast have been behind those startups, and we've had Allume Energy represented here, and Wattblock, and one of the questions I was actually going to ask you, Carlos, is, does NABERS operate as purely a certification authority, if you like, or does NABERS get involved in guiding owners through that process of looking at different features in their building like Allume or Wattblock might do, or do you just stick to, "You guys fix it, and we'll come and give you the rating?"

Carlos Flores: Yes, that's exactly right. So, what we're doing is, we try to complement what people in industry are doing. So, we

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don't go to your building and tell people what to do exactly and how do you save energy in that building in particular. What we're doing is we tell them, this building is 1 star, and buildings that are 1 star usually have many, many, many energy-saving opportunities, so we give them a simple indication of how well they're performing, and then we let a lot of people in industry who in this space to go in and help them.

And part of the reason why we do this, Amanda, is because if you go to a complex mission like a high rise apartment building, it's not like when you go into a house. In a house, in 2 seconds, you can look at the house and you can go, you can change that light fitting, you can change this water head in the shower. When you go into a building there are systems, and they need a little bit more analysis, a little bit more comprehension to find the opportunities. So, what we find in the office sector is that by giving people an indication of how well they're doing and leaving industry to step in and help people to find the best opportunities for their assets, a lot of people step in on that market, and they do a much better job than we could.

Amanda Farmer: And is the idea when it comes to disclosure for the residential property sector, is the idea that we would have similar legislation to what's in the commercial sector, that landlords, or perhaps vendors who are selling their strata units, would need to disclose what the building's rating is? Is that the idea?

Carlos Flores: I think that's what a lot of people have been mentioning in the past few years, and if you look at some of the public statements that have been made in the last, maybe, 2 years, both New South Wales and Victoria have commitments to at least explore a voluntary disclosure scheme for all residential buildings, both apartments and also detached houses, and so we are seeing a trend in that direction, but I think, if you ask me, I think it's just a matter of time for when we're going to see more disclosure in this space. We don't know if that's going to be a few months, or it could be a few years, but what we do know is that people who are purchasing apartment buildings today, and people who are renting those buildings, do not have any clear or transparent indication of how much money they are spending on the common space. That information is really obscure and difficult to obtain for a lot of people. And even if you get the amounts of money and the amounts of kilowatt hours use of energy, that information tends to be meaningless to the people who need to make decisions.

Because when we were at Griffith University, I believe I asked the crowd, which is full of engineers and people who know a lot about energy, I asked them, who thinks that a certain amount of kilowatt hours is very efficient or very inefficient. Most people didn't know either. Most people, they didn't actually know what 100-kilowatt hours per meter squared mean. I've done that in a lot of conferences because those numbers are meaningless, and what we're trying to do in NABERS is just bring a language that people can understand. If you tell somebody, your building is 3 stars, and it's about average, most people can understand that very easily and make decisions on that. If you're going to purchase a property, and the building is 0 stars in the common space, you know that building is using a lot of energy, much more than it should be using and that you're going to be wasting a lot of money on power bills that you could be saving. So, it's about giving that simple language to allow people who are making investment decisions to make better decisions and prefer buildings that are more sustainable and also improve the buildings that they are in already.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, fabulous. It's an excellent idea, as you say, giving that ease of access, ease of understanding of that kind of information which can otherwise be quite complex, and I suppose for the people who are already living in these buildings, at the end of the day, money talks, and if you can have people going into the building and explaining how much money can be saved if they take up some of these initiatives, for example, not only are you going to save \$10,000 on your water bill, you're also going to end up with a 3 or 4 star rating, which is then going to attract, perhaps, the kind of people to your building that you're wanting to attract because you're adding that kind of value, and they're going to choose your building over the one, perhaps, across the road or down the street.

Carlos Flores: It's exactly right. And if you think about it, all the financials make sense, and we've seen this change already in offices and in shopping centres. If you think about the average 2-unit apartment in Sydney, or Melbourne, or other capital cities, it could fluctuate between \$500 to over \$1,000. It depends on where you are, and how big the space is, and other variables, but if you think about that, right, an apartment building, you're renting for, say, \$1,000 a week, the amount of rent that you're going to collect a year is about \$50,000, right?

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So, if that building is wasting, or power bills in the common space are \$500 or \$3,000 a year, that actually is a significant difference in the amount of returns that you're getting. A building that is wasting a lot of energy is going to cost you 3, 4, even 5% of your total

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rental income and that has an impact on the value of that property. So, we've seen that logic happening in the office sector. As soon as you have enough people certifying, and those market forces do start operating, and you do see some properties getting a 2, 3, 4% premium because they are more sustainable, and I do think that we're going to see this in the residential sector. Whether we're going to see it right now, or it might take us years to get there, that's an open question at this point in time, but I do think we're going to see it.

And the other thing that is a strong force that is coming up is there is a lot of sustainable investment coming to the property sector. This has been, again, happening in commercial buildings for some time now, but we have seen the first few investors, and particularly from big banks and other institutional investors who are looking to invest in buildings that are low-carbon, and who are willing to either give a premium to buildings that are more sustainable, or actually only finance buildings that meet a minimum energy efficiency requirement. We've seen that in offices. I think, again, it's only a matter of time before we see it in residential buildings. And we've seen a couple of financial institutions that are very progressive in Australia that already has contacted us to see whether they can use NABERS as a minimum requirement to invest in a new development. So, I think there are a few market forces that are going to come into the apartment sector, and it's really exciting 'cause it's actually driving incentives in the right direction.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Fabulous. It is really exciting, and I love hearing about that real, on-the-ground impact that NABERS is having, and I agree, I think we're only going to see it go from strength to strength over the next few years, so, excellent that you're at the forefront of that.

Carlos Flores: Thank you. I think there's one thing that I'd like to say, and I think it's important to mention it, is that Australia has excellent conditions to be a world leader in sustainability in residential buildings. We have a very skilled workforce, excellent infrastructure, and what we need is to find the right incentives so people who are doing the right thing for the environment get the benefit and the financial benefit. And some of the things that I've mentioned are going to give some additional incentives to people, and I think we're going to see more policies pushing more incentives in that space, and I think I'd be surprised if we get to 2020 and building an unsustainable building doesn't have some negative financial implications on it.

Amanda Farmer: It's interesting that you say that, Australia being at the forefront, because I was in Perth recently at a conference at Curtin University, and it was attended by property lawyers and academics from around the world, and one of the leading academics from the UK in strata title approached me, and she was talking about a project that they're doing in relation to sustainable buildings. And I was telling her a little bit about the people I've been talking to here who are involved in those projects, and I spoke particularly about NABERS, and I said, "Have you heard of NABERS?" And she said, "Yes," and she said, "In the context of commercial property," and she was really interested in it, and I'm actually going to connect her to you to talk about the residential side and make sure that in the UK, they're looking at what we're doing here in Australia and getting ideas, and being able to use some of those resources to take all that good work around the world, so, really exciting.

Carlos Flores: I mean, it's really exciting. I was in London about 4 months ago, and in commercial buildings NABERS is quite a buzz word at the moment because we have some concrete opportunities to do some pilots in the United Kingdom, and I think a lot of people who've been working in this space for a while know very well that office and retail buildings in Australia have become much more sustainable in the last decade than the trend has been in cities like London. That hasn't been the same in apartment buildings, but it's partly because we didn't have the right policies and the right tools to encourage that behaviour. I think my goal as the manager of NABERS is, I think by 2020 we could see an apartment building market where a lot of people are disclosing, certifying, and improving the carbon emissions, and getting rewards for that, and I think that's, that is achievable. We have a number of people pushing in that direction, and that's the kind of incentives that can make you a world leader, and I think we could be there in a few years.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. Looking forward to it. Now, we're slowly running out of time, Carlos, and I know you've got to run, but I

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do want to ask you the book question. What books have had the greatest impact on you, and why?

Carlos Flores: That's a great question 'cause I do read a lot, and it's really hard to pick a winner, but one book that I love is called Creativity, Inc. by the founder of Pixar in the US. His name is Ed Catmull. And the reason why I love it, it's a book about management, and the reason why I really love that book is that managing a team of passionate people, there's many books about that, and all of them tend to oversimplify how hard it is to make a difference in the world, and they oversimplify with a small number of buzz words, and, you know, fail first, fail fast, and really, they don't give you an idea of how hard it is to make a big difference in the world.

The book by Pixar and Ed Catmull, it's all about how difficult it is and how it's meant to be difficult to make a difference. And it's that life and making a difference in the world is not about being easy. It's meant to be hard, and that's fine because easy is not really the goal. Changing the world and making a difference is what the goal is. I would totally recommend it to anyone who's managing people, or a team, or a project where you need to influence stakeholders. It is a wonderful piece of work. And if you love Pixar movies, like me, I love Pixar movies, it's also full of examples of great movies, with, you know, Toy Story to Cars and Finding Nemo. It's just a wonderful read.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. Thank you. Creativity, Inc. I'll make sure that we've got a link to that in our show notes for any of our listeners who want to check that out. Now, Carlos, before we wrap up, anything else you want to say, and how do our listeners find out more about you and NABERS, and particularly, how do they get involved in that pilot program?

Carlos Flores: Absolutely. So, our website, first of all, is nabers.gov.au, and it's the best place to find information about NABERS, and also, our email is nabers@environment.nsw.gov.au.

Amanda Farmer: And I'll just make it clear to our listeners, that's N-A-B-E-R-S, NABERS.

Carlos Flores: Absolutely. And the best way to get in contact with us for a pilot is, we would like to know via email, would like to know where you are, and we are looking for buildings that are high rise at this point in time. We want a mix of buildings in different cities. We don't want all buildings in Sydney or all buildings in Melbourne. We really want to go around the country and get quite a few champions around, so if you live or work in a building that is more than 20 units and it has some common spaces like some air conditioning, or heating, or a car park, we would love to work with you, and we'll go with you and work in your city, and we'll love to see how this product is going to work for other people. We're looking for people that are early adopters, that are interested in participating in the design of a new product that can change market, and that often takes a little bit of time, but it also is quite rewarding because people can help us shape the way this tool is going to work, so it's better, and it's more lean, and efficient once it's out.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. I'll make sure all of those links and the email address are over at the show notes for this episode, which is at yourstrataproperty.com.au/podcast. Just scroll down and find Carlos's headshot down there. Thank you so much for your time today, Carlos. I was really looking forward to our chat, and I'm so glad that we've been able to share the creativity and the game-changer that NABERS is.

Carlos Flores: Look, and I'm really excited. NABERS is, it's really about enabling people who are doing great work to showcase their achievements and get rewarded for that. It's much more about people out there than it is about us, and it's just really exciting to be here, and we'd love to come back once the tool is out and we have a few champions on the ground, and we'd love to share a little bit more about those experiences and those pilots.

Amanda Farmer: Awesome. You'll be welcome. Thanks, Carlos.

Outro: Thank you for listening to Your Strata Property, the podcast which consistently delivers to property owners reliable and accurate information about their strata property. You can access all the information below this episode via the show notes at www.yourstrataproperty.com.au. You can also ask questions in the comments section, which Amanda will answer in her upcoming episodes. How can Amanda help you today?



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