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YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 335. The power of a STAG

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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.

Amanda Farmer: Hello and welcome to this week's podcast episode. I'm your host, Amanda Farmer, and it's my job here each week to help demystify the legal complexities of apartment living. My guest this week is Cath Hewitt. Cath has an extensive background in local government and consulting, in governance, integrity and project management. She also has experience in business management and business improvement. Cath has in-depth knowledge of relationship-building and place-making and works with neighbourhoods and communities to build capacity and resilience.

At the moment, Cath is the President of the Committee for Meals on Wheels, Western Australia, and also a national board member for Meals on Wheels Australia. Cath also works with local governments and strata associations in emergency management, response and recovery, and economic development. Cath is currently the secretary of the strata council at City Towers in Perth, WA, and in 2021 City Towers was the winner of the People's Choice Award at the Australian Apartment Awards for Excellence.

Now, Cath was connected to me by a podcast listener, special hello and thank you to Kim. Kim thought a conversation with Cath would be a breath of fresh air for all of us. And I think once I take you over to the conversation, you will know why. Together with her fellow owners, Cath has achieved some pretty impressive things over at City Towers and she has been kind enough to take us behind the scenes and share how her award-winning community is going from strength to strength. I'll take you right on over now to my chat with Cath Hewitt. Cath Hewitt, welcome to the show.

Cath Hewitt: Thank you very much for having me. It's a pleasure.

Amanda Farmer: Thank you for taking the time to join me all the way, all the way from Western Australia, the other side of the country compared to where I am. What's your strata story, Cath? Tell us a bit about your experience in strata.

Cath Hewitt: Well, we might be on other sides of the country, but I believe that we probably have got a lot in common in regards to stratas and living in apartments, and my story is just one of them. I moved into an apartment building in the CBD of Perth about 6 years ago and I fell in love with the building. That's why I moved in. It was absolutely beautiful. It's an older building, it's about 36 years old, solid brick, a little bit different to the concrete structures that we see now. And it's got little glimpses of art deco and it's on three titles, so it's got really lovely spaces around the building as well.

Our pool is on the ground floor taking up lots of space and we've still got two and three different gardens as well. We have all these beautiful spaces in this old iconic building. And yes, I moved in and it's only got 64 apartments in it, so it's not a really big apartment building. But I moved in and didn't realise that the council of owners, as it was called then, was a little bit old-fashioned and very, very strict and enforcing laws that were not legal. That's how I got involved in the strata council side.

Amanda Farmer: You've come in as a new owner, you have got the feeling that things perhaps aren't operating as they should and you've put up your hand to say, "Hey, I want to be part of the solution here." Is that right? Because there will have some listeners going, "Wow, Brave Lady."

Cath Hewitt: It was a lot more complex than that, let me tell you. There was a very strongly embedded council of owners who had been there for many years and they had the voting process wrapped up and the proxies. And so my first meeting was just raising points like, "Where's our 10-year budget plan? Where's the maintenance schedule? I can't vote for this piece of infrastructure if I don't know what the ongoing costs are going to be". And it was a difficult meeting because I was just asking questions that I felt were relevant. And so the council of owners were quite... they could do some mean things and they started to do mean things and I don't like bullies.

I mounted a campaign that took 18 months and went around... First of all, I approached council. I really, really wanted to work with

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them. I had a lot of contacts. I was in the area's local government so I could help a lot and it wasn't welcome. I just started to chat to all the owners. I went door to door, chatted to the owners and the residents, found out their stories, found out what they really liked about the building, what they really wanted to happen in the building, and just worked together to let owners know that there was a way that we could make this a more amenable community. And over time it worked and we got the votes and we got into council.

Amanda Farmer: I love that. Now just for our East Coast listeners, when Cath refers to the council of owners, that is the equivalent of our strata committee or executive committee. It's the small group of owners that have the task of the day-to-day management of a strata community. Now Cath, as I understand it, this is a community that went on to win awards and we're going to talk a little bit about that. But before we do, let me know what do you love most about strata living, and then I'd also love for you to share what you find most difficult?

Cath Hewitt: I definitely love the social connection and that sense of community. I feel like I'm in a neighbourhood when I step outside my door, but I also feel like I've got really great privacy in my apartment building. There seems to be an unwritten rule in our apartment building that you don't just knock on someone's door. You always text or call before you go to the apartment. It's really lovely. You can step out onto your landing and you can have this communal conversation near the lifts and then you step back and you've got home and you've got your privacy and yes, I really, really enjoy that. And our building has only got 4 apartments on each floor. So you step out into that square foyer right near the lift, so it's a meeting spot the minute you get outside your door.

And one of the difficulties or the struggles that we encountered and we have overcome to a certain degree is letting owners and residents know what strata council does and what the strata council, the strata manager and the building manager are responsible for. When we had the very militant council of owners, strata council, it seemed that the building just sat back, didn't get involved and expected everything to be done for them. But when we came on council, a group of very motivated, enthusiastic, and different skills on the council, we encouraged a really different holistic approach where we wanted everybody to be involved.

And the education of letting people know that strata council just oversaw the operations. All the nice-to-haves in a 37-year-old building were extras that if we had time as volunteers, we did, but we wanted other people to be involved. And that's one of the biggest things we've done. We've got other people involved. And so what we do is we form what we call STAG groups, short-term action groups.

Amanda Farmer: I love it.

Cath Hewitt: It's fantastic. And we've had a number. We've probably had 8 different STAG groups. And when someone comes to us like they did when the new Strata Titles Act came in and said, "I believe we can have pets," we encouraged a group of people who wanted to have pets and wanted to look into this, and actually a couple who didn't want pets to form a STAG. And we have very strict guidelines on how they operate, and then they go and do all of the research, suggest a policy or a by-law and then come back and make recommendations to the council. And that has been one of the best things we've done.

Amanda Farmer: How many council members do you have?

Cath Hewitt: We have 7.

Amanda Farmer: Okay. That's a good number. And short-term action groups, STAG groups, I really like that. Does this come from perhaps your experience working with local government? Have you been inspired there to bring some of that way of thinking to your community?

Cath Hewitt: Without a doubt. In local government, there's a lot of planning that you do and I try not to over plan in our strata council, but things like the 10-year plan, focusing on our budgets, focusing on the projects that we need. And the building was very run down and still needs a lot of work. It's a beautiful building but it needs a lot of work to maintain it. Our plant and equipment,

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some of it is 37 years old, so we have to continually look at what would be lovely to put in a Mediterranean garden or do we fix the generator, things like that. That's where our STAG groups come up with the best ideas. We have an exterior STAG group at the moment and they're looking at all the gardens, all of the designs, the painting of the building. And that informs council when something breaks, we don't just patch it up, we patch it up or we fix it with the designs that they've come up with so that we are continually improving and not just keeping an equilibrium.

Amanda Farmer: Do you find that those who put their hands up to be on STAG group are owner-occupiers? Do you have any investor owners who are keen to be involved in a STAG?

Cath Hewitt: We did have an investor owner, but mainly they're owner-occupiers, and we've had a couple of tenants as well because they're not making the decisions, we're not breaking any of the parts of the Act and we really work very hard to work with our tenants and include them with all of our community gatherings, and if they've got complaints to take them seriously. 50% of our building is tenanted and we've had a lot of comments from tenants who say they've never been treated so well or their complaints or their comments taken so seriously as they are in our building, but we want to welcome everybody into our building because they're all part of our community.

Amanda Farmer: Now, I'm sure that we'll have listeners thinking, oh I'd love to do something like that in my community but we just don't have the level of engagement that we need. We don't have owners who would put their hands up to be part of a STAG or a sub-committee. Is there anything special that you're doing over there to have this level of engagement? Do you tap people on the shoulder, do you pay them? Do you promise them goodies? How do you do it?

Cath Hewitt: There definitely was a reluctance in the beginning. One of the things that I would strongly encourage anyone who is on a strata committee or strata council is to do what we do every 6 to 12 months and we have a secession planning workshop and we invite owners to come along to that and sometimes we do tap them on the shoulder as well. And it's all about we're revelling one in the next few weeks and I've just done the media for it and it's, "Do you know what the strata council does? Do you know what STAG groups do? Do you want to know more about what happens in your building?"

And then we invite everyone in just to have a chat and find out what they love. One lady loves herb gardens, so she is forming a garden STAG. We've got people who work in our building because we're in the CBD of Perth who are engineers. And so we ask them if we can call on them for their expertise when we are looking at some of our old plan, not to get them to do the work, but to say, "These are the quotes we've got, this is what the work they want to do, what do you think about this?" And we use their knowledge to help us with making decisions.

At these secession planning meetings, we talk about what roles maybe they would like to take on in the future. And that's how we've managed to get our last chair who made a 3 to 5-year commitment to be chair. And we've just passed over to our treasurer. He was the same, he's come on board, started out with a few small things and now has taken on the full role and we're about to roll over my role as secretary, but people don't want to do that job. I don't know why. It's a lot of work. What we're suggesting is we divide the secretary role up a little bit so it's not so onerous for one person.

The secession planning. The other thing that I would... Again, one of the gold is popup sessions. So we get a table downstairs in different places. We sometimes do them near our... I'll tell you about our bin room soon. The bin room is amazing. We might go down to the bin room, we'll have them in the foyer, we'll have them at the pool and we just have a table and a few council members or STAG members and people walk past and they chat. And when they start to chat they tell you about, "Oh, I've noticed this or have you thought about this?" And you engage people. As soon you start to engage them, you hear about what they like and you're able to actually get people to form STAGs unwittingly. You'll get a couple of people there, "Well, I like herb gardens too," and I'll go and have a coffee with them both and have a chat to them and see how then they can flesh out that idea a little bit more. Nothing will happen unless you actually communicate and you engage with people.

Amanda Farmer: Tell me about the bin room.

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Cath Hewitt: Our bin room... We formed a sustainability STAG and our bin room is a little tiny room so we bricked it all up and made more space and have created this space now that is clean, fresh, air freshener. I've got a big board up there, it's like a kiddie's glue gun project that I put onto a notice board where I've got everything that you can recycle and everything that you can't recycle. And it's amazing how many people stand and stare at and there's only a few things you can recycle in Western Australia, we just don't have the recycling companies here. It's visual. They walk into the room and they can see it. It's not just a sign that they ignore as they lift the bin up.

We also provided every apartment with a food waste bin and every apartment with a recycle bag so that plastic bags didn't go into our recycle bin. Then we formed another room because it was so good, and we've got our swap room, our book swap area, our textile bin that Good Sammy's pick up every week and that is full every week. We do two bin loads of food waste a week and we have a borrow wheelbarrow, a borrow ladder and a borrow hose that people can access, plus all the recycling of CDs and cartridges and bread tops. And that's run by the STAG sustainability and they take all of those items down to the place that you dump them whenever they're full. So it's been a huge success.

Amanda Farmer: Do you have a building manager on site? I think you mentioned a building manager earlier.

Cath Hewitt: We do, but not full-time. We just can't afford to pay a building manager full-time. We went out, again, this was a little bit different to what I think some buildings do, but we wanted a new building manager. We went out to market and we got some applications and then we had quite a rigorous interview process where council sat in on the interview. We really wanted to have the building manager engage with us to see what they could offer. And we did a trial for 12 months with one building manager, but we felt that they weren't right after that year, so we just did that. We didn't sign the contract for longer.

Then we tried someone else, did the trial for the 12 months, has worked out really well and we now have him and he's a structural engineer so he brings in some skills that other building managers don't and he costs a little bit more and we have him on site less. But we've educated our owners to not expect to have someone on site all the time. There's phone numbers that you can call, but there's not always going to be someone that you can talk to and possibly complain to. We encourage that to happen at our strata council meetings where we allow 15 minutes every meeting for any owners to come to the meeting and talk to us and residents, tenants as well. And we always ask them to submit what they're going to talk about so that we know what they're going to talk about and we can help them.

Amanda Farmer: How often is your strata council meeting?

Cath Hewitt: Monthly. There's so much to do. There's so many projects here that we just feel that monthly is necessary.

Amanda Farmer: And I imagine you have great support from your strata manager. Are they involved in these projects? Where do they fit in with the day-to-day?

Cath Hewitt: Yes, the day-to-day. Our strata managers, we went through the same process of choosing one as well. We wanted to get someone who was really on the same page as us and very experienced. Our strata manager does all our admin obviously, but they don't get involved in projects. They're more in the admin of the projects, the work orders and the letters to owners and things like that. And they're the contact point for emergencies as well. A lot of our owners and residents used to just call up the strata manager and building manager 24/7.

So we've educated them with a lot of visual flyers about this is an emergency, this is not an emergency. If you call someone for not an emergency you'll get charged. It was quite amazing how quickly that dropped off and people now just call the strata manager for emergencies and the building manager, and our strata manager helps us with all the legalities that we need.

Amanda Farmer: When you say you'll get charged, do you mean the individual owner or the strata company will get charged and we'll all have to contribute to that charge?

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Cath Hewitt: No. The owner. Yes. No, the owner will get charged.

Amanda Farmer: Great that you can do that.

Cath Hewitt: Well, we haven't actually done it yet, but the threat was enough. I don't want to call it a threat. But it was an encouragement to say, "Is there water flooding into your apartment? That's an emergency. Is there a tap leaking? Can it wait till the morning?" Really weighing up what is an emergency.

Amanda Farmer: Now, Cath, is this utopia or do you have problems from time to time maybe with difficult residents? And if so, how do you deal with that?

Cath Hewitt: It's definitely not utopia. Everyone struggles with their day-to-day items and where you have people living in close proximity in a horizontal building, you're going to have people who don't agree and you're going to have people who just like to poke the bear, really. We work with, again, work with them as much as possible. It was interesting because just recently we had... We've gone out and had a lot of surveys that have been created by our exterior design STAG group and they've gone out and they've got answers from all the owners who wanted to respond about... It wasn't just, "Do you want a barbecue here?" It was more a holistic approach. "What do you like about living at City Towers? What do you want to expand upon? Is this garden more a reflective garden?" We looked at the holistic as well as the practical.

And then we had a meeting to show people some of the designs a few weeks ago. And a couple of the owners who are quite prickly came to that and were quite vocal in the beginning. But again, by communicating and communicating and explaining about the surveys, we've had the input. They didn't really have much to say in the end because everything had been communicated. And that's your key. You have to let everyone know what you're doing all of the time and have lots of different ways to let people know.

And I don't think they were pacified, but they were definitely not as aggressive as they were in the beginning, which was really good. And we have problems with civil problems. "The car's park too close to me, or they're walking too heavily," and all that sort of stuff. We just encourage people to talk and to take the sting out and to come to our meet and greets because once you've met someone, it's a bit easier to say, "Hey, did you know if you wear your high heels around, that's really loud in my apartment." And the conversations can be had a little bit more easily, but you're always going to have problems.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, you're really laying the foundations there I think for a great community by having your regular popups and your invitations to attend council meetings and then engaging as many owners as possible in decision-making and joining your STAGs. So that, I agree, when the inevitable does happen, solutions can be found without as much conflict. I just love listening to how that's playing out for you.

Cath Hewitt: Yes, it does work and it does take time, but it's worth it because it's your home. And one of the things, I know it sounds really weird, one of the things I don't like happening is when people come up to me when I'm in my home and treat me like a strata council member and it's, "Have you heard about this?" And so I don't draw the line because I always like to listen to people, but I do ask them, "Is it necessary to have this conversation now because I'm with my son at the moment and I think that maybe we could have a coffee or something and talk about it?" and I found that that's been quite successful because the blurring of problems and the aggressiveness is diminished when you sit down on equal terms and you're ready for a conversation.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. I am so pleased that you've said that. I have found myself in exactly the same position in my own community many times and having to set those boundaries, which as a lawyer I'm quite comfortable with setting boundaries and comfortable with conflict and maybe dealing with difficult situations when I set those boundaries and say, "Hey, can we make a time to chat about this? Or can you send me a text and we'll make a time to chat?" Then of course the other person realises, "Oh yes, indeed. It's not appropriate to bail you up in the lift when you're with your son and your puppy dog." But some people find that difficult, they do find that difficult. It's great to hear from you how you're doing that in your community and at the end of the day, I think if we're going to continue to serve at the level that our communities deserve, then it's incumbent on us to set those boundaries and make sure that people comply with them.

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Cath Hewitt: And it's our home. And I don't want to leave council, which I'm hoping to in the future. I'm not being encouraged by the other members, but I want to be able to leave and still have my really lovely home. I don't want to leave and think I've had enough of this and I want to move out. And I think that sometimes that does happen with counsellors. I want to have that balance because I absolutely love where I live and I don't want to feel that, oh it's all just too much now.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, indeed. Now last year, Cath, City Towers was the winner of the People's Choice Award at the Australian Apartment Awards for Excellence over in Western Australia. How did the idea to apply for this award come about?

Cath Hewitt: It was a little bit strange really. We were doing all of these things that we were doing and we had a massive, a whole wall of a room with projects on it, short term, medium term, long term and what we were doing, because we needed just the visual, the pieces of paper weren't cutting it. And we just kept on getting told one by our strata managers and two by our building manager and other people saying, "Other buildings don't do this. What do you mean? What's a STAG? Sustainability? What do you mean to... "

And sustainability. So excited. We actually got rated 5.5 out of 6 on the NABERS rating for Western Australia and there's only two buildings in Western Australia that have got that. We were just doing so many things for sustainability, for water, for recycling, by interviewing, by involving the community, which I didn't think was anything special, but apparently, it was.

Amanda Farmer: It is. Let me tell you.

Cath Hewitt: One of our counsellors saw this award and said, "Come on, we're going to apply for this." And so we did and had a great night. The Awards Night was fantastic and we won. It was so exciting. It was lovely, and lovely to share with the rest of the building as well.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Well, I am not surprised that you won and indeed you are unique. I have been operating in this space in one form or another for almost 20 years now and there is a reason that you were connected to me to have a chat to on the podcast. We do wherever possible like to feature good news stories but sadly they can be few and far between in our space. You are definitely a unique building and it's wonderful that you're able to share with us how you've achieved all of these things that you have achieved. As we wrap up, Cath, can you let us know just three things if you can narrow it down that you would advise owners aspiring to build a community like City Towers? What are three things that you'd want to relate to them?

Cath Hewitt: I think I've already mentioned them. Definitely, the communication and forming those STAG groups. So important for the nice to have projects, so important because otherwise they're five years down the track and people who really wanted to have a workshop for doing a few things, they've moved out. Get people involved by forming those STAG groups. Forming the connections with people. Don't waste a meeting. If you see someone that you've never met before, go and say hello and, "Oh hi, You live in the building?" And just introduce yourself and you've got a touch point there.

Inductions. I really, really encourage inductions. We have taken on, even though our strata manager still does it because they have to by law, have a database of everyone in the building and who moves in and out. I've taken over that and I asked the strata manager to provide me with information every month on who's moved in and out. I update our database and then I touch base with those people and I ask them to come and join me for an induction. And so I go around, I've got it all typed out to tick, so I follow each one, show people where the storage rooms are, what keys they need, how to recycle, give them a bin, a food bin, give them a recycling bin. I explain how the pool works and we chat while we're walking around, and that has been a great connection point to enable you then to bring those people on that journey of our community at City Towers.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, I'm not surprised. It is something that I often recommend to at least have a welcome pack, something that new owners, new residents are getting, and if you can have that personal contact too all the better, Cath, something that is in my mind and maybe in the minds of our listeners as well is how do you personally find the time to do all of this very high touch work in your community?

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Cath Hewitt: Oh, I don't know if it's because I don't have a life or not. I'm not really-

Amanda Farmer: Doubt it.

Cath Hewitt: I work from home a lot. I do consulting, so it's amazing how much more you can fit in when you do that. But just taking an hour out on a Saturday morning after I've gone for my walk to do an induction, that doesn't take very long, now it's up and running. In the beginning, it was time-consuming, very time-consuming. Now, it isn't as much and we have more people on board who are following the journey as well and more people willing to take on a few chores. And at nighttime instead of sitting down and watching telly all night, I'll pop down and I'll do a few things and spend a half hour here or a little bit of time there. Once you have your direction from council, it isn't hard to maintain it. It's that beginning bit where... Make sure you've got a really good committee behind you and hopefully a couple of people who maybe aren't prepared to be on the committee, but they can assist you with setting up all these processes.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, there's a lot to be said for having good systems, good procedures when we want to be more efficient, but I still think there will be plenty of people out there who would just like to clone you, Cath, and have you come and help their communities.

Now, I'm sure there are lots of questions arising from our chat and there'll be many owners, committee members, council members out there wanting to gain some specific direction from you on certain issues. I do encourage our listeners to post a comment under this episode over on the website, which is at yourstrataproperty.com.au/podcasts. You'll see our chat posted there and you can post comments under the episode and if there are specific questions for Cath's attention, I might shoot them through to her and see if she's able to help us out. Otherwise, Cath, do you have any social media or LinkedIn or anywhere that you wouldn't mind people connecting with you further?

Cath Hewitt: I've got a LinkedIn profile. I can send that to you if you like and then you can put that onto the chat.

Amanda Farmer: Definitely. I'll share Cath's LinkedIn profile and if you do have specific questions that either I can help you with or Cath can help you with, post them there under the episode and I'm sure we will all be able to learn from each other's experience.

Thank you so much Cath Hewitt for joining me for this chat today. I feel buoyed, I feel positive. I am looking forward to taking some of these ideas and running with them in my own community, which is great.

Cath Hewitt: Oh, it's an absolute pleasure and it's so good to meet like-minded people and I hope that our little property, and some of the things we've done, can be a bit of a motivation, but I love to learn from other people as well. There's so much good happening in strata and it's an exciting place to live and be in. Congratulations to everyone who's involved.

Amanda Farmer: Nice one. Thank you, Cath.

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?