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YSP Podcast Transcript: 395. The Clever Mapping Helping to Electrify Strata - With Wattblock

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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, strata lawyer, Amanda Farmer. And my guest this week is Brent Clark.

Brent is the CEO and founder of Wattblock, which has advised strata buildings, housing over 85,000 residents on solar, EV charging and efficiency for the past nine years. This includes working with 12 local councils, and three state governments on sustainability programs. Brent has coordinated research into strata and energy with six universities working most closely with the University of New South Wales.

Brent has degrees in science, law, applied finance, and an MBA and has been a strata committee member for 20 years.

To share what's new on the sustainability front, especially when it comes to the electrification of our Strata buildings, I'll take you over now to my chat with Brent Clark.

Amanda Farmer: Brent Clark, welcome to the show.

Brent Clark: Great to be here Amanda.

Amanda Farmer: Brent, your name and the name of your business, Wattblock will be very familiar to many of our listeners, but just in case we have some listeners who haven't yet come across you, tell us a bit about you, your background in strata and what it is that Wattblock does.

Brent Clark: First of all, I've just crossed 20 years as a strata committee member myself. If I go back to 2011, I was on a committee and we had a three-day power outage in our apartment block. And then I had to take on the chairperson role and navigate us through that energy crisis. And that gave me the idea for starting Wattblock.

So since then, we've assisted over a thousand strata buildings with solar, battery, electric vehicle charging, heat pump, and energy efficiency reports. And we've had assistance from two state governments, 12 local councils, six universities, most in particular, UNSW. We've also had 200 students from those universities researching strata and energy to try and work out the best way to navigate the energy transition for apartment buildings.

Amanda Farmer: And look, if we think 10, 11 years ago, you might've been a bit ahead of your time then. But really coming into your own now, I'm sure with the increasing understanding and availability and energy for sustainable infrastructure and sustainable solutions.

Brent Clark: If we think back to like the SCA awards in 2015, I think Catherine Lezer won an award for Boddery Cope with like a 4.5-kilowatt solar system. And this year we had a couple of towers out at Rhodes, poured 140 kilowatts of solar on their buildings. So definitely come a long way on that front. And in the early days we were just dealing with the people that bought the very first Teslas that came into the country. And now there's like a wide range of electric vehicles. And so it's maybe seven to eight per cent of new vehicles bought in Australia are electric vehicles now. And so there's been a big change.

Amanda Farmer: You've recently launched a new project that I understand you're calling Electrify Strata. What's that all about?

Brent Clark: Well, we've been working with a lot of individual strata buildings and we're in this energy transition. And I think if you look around, it's going to go on this energy transition and it's got to conclude at some point, but it actually has to accelerate to a faster speed than what we've been able to do to date.

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And so we thought there were basically two barriers to all the strata buildings adopting electrification. And by that, we mean like solar batteries, EV charging, heat pumps, et cetera.

One, you actually need some peer pressure from your neighbours in your local area to help the strata committee members that are proactive and trying to drive change in the building. A second thing is we need a property valuation reset so that buildings that have gone and actually done these projects actually get the reward at the individual apartment level for their property valuation increases.

And so Domain, the real estate site, did a study last year and they actually proved one of those points that if you've got all these energy features in strata buildings, your individual apartment can be worth \$72,000 more than the equivalent apartment that doesn't have the energy features or about a 12.7% increase. So they solved that problem in terms of showing that across their data set of Australia, there is a property valuation uplift that is to be had after electrification.

And then with Electrify Strata, we thought, well, how do we bring that down to the local area and we started actually mapping individual strata buildings in different local council areas. We started with North Sydney and we've now increased it out to 16 different local council areas in Sydney covering one-third of the total strata schemes in New South Wales.

And what we're doing is we're showing on simple Google Maps in each of those areas which strata buildings have got solar, which ones have got the battery, which ones have got EV charging or heat pumps and embedded networks and electricity monitoring devices and maybe have done a neighbour's rating. And the idea is to actually make that tangible. So to give you an example, if you're in a strata committee in the ride local government area, and you're campaigning to put solar on your apartment building, you can go to the map and say, well, here are 87 other strata buildings in ride area that have solar.

This shows that it's not like this incredible, insurmountable challenge. We can probably see one that's in the next street or the next suburb from us. And that will help with two different things. One, it will help the sustainability champion to build momentum, and also it'll create a keeping up with the Joneses effect. So that's what we're doing by making it visible with a drop pin on a Google map for each strata building and what they've installed. It's actually making it tangible, making it real and people will be able to see we're progressing through this electrification.

Amanda Farmer: And it's visible both to the people who are in the building, championing the change for their own building and visible to those who are outside, perhaps looking at whether they should purchase in the building that's in street A or street B. And one of the benefits that I get from these otherwise almost identical buildings.

This is such a great time to be talking about this because I was delivering some education for strata managers just this week on a webinar and one of the New South Wales Fair Trading compulsory CPD topics that strata managers must now do is electric vehicle charging.

And as part of the learning, we talk about the benefits and also the risks of EV charging. And when I was speaking about the benefits, I sort of had a slide that said, look, all you have to do is a quick Google and you'll see the media articles unless we as residents in apartment buildings are engaged with the process of installing EV infrastructure, we are just not going to reach our net zero targets for 2050.

We have to be part of this conversation. We have to be, you know, that there's a big benefit there. It's a climate benefit. And I was interrupted by a strata manager who said, Amanda, you try telling that to our committees. Yes, for some committees, the people who are on board with that are on board with that. You're not changing any minds there.

But there are people who are not necessarily on board with that and they need a different reason. And what you're doing here, Brent, is making that different reason very clear, very tangible. \$72,000 increase, a 12% increase in your property value. I'm signing up for that, whether I'm a scientist or not.

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Brent Clark: Yes, so you don't have to have the net zero discussion at your strata committee level. If you think about just with this amount of electric vehicles coming in, we'll very quickly have like a disparity, a breakaway in the price of apartments that are ready for EV charging versus those that aren't. And we've seen renters turn up to apartment buildings and choose not to rent there because they can't charge their electric vehicles.

So basically the discussion moves from you don't have to have the discussion around climate change. You don't have to have the discussion around payback either because it's about capital value appreciation. And that's something that all owners, whether they're an owner-occupier or an owner-investor, are on board with.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. And I can definitely see why. Brent, you work with a number of different buildings across various local council areas. Can you give us some examples of buildings that are successfully electrifying? What are they doing? And are they really seeing these immediate savings and value uplifts?

Brent Clark: Yes, so, a good example is a building that we've worked with over the last six years that came through the City of Sydney grants program. And that's Galleria down in Wollamadoo. And they're an example of a building. It's 64 apartments and they've done all their energy efficiency projects. They did their LED lighting, upgraded their hot water system and then they moved ahead with solar and batteries. And so they put down like a 22-kilowatt solar system and 26.6-kilowatt hours of batteries. They also put together their EV charging roadmap. And just to give you an idea, that building went from a zero-star neighbour energy rating to 4.5 stars and from a two-star water rating to three stars.

And they probably spent about \$136,000 in total on projects. And that would have paid back in about six years. And if you have a look for those who are interested in carbon emissions reduction, they're saving 76 tons of carbon per annum in a block of 64 apartments. So that's an example of a building that's embraced electrification.

Last year, you had Nathan Haig from Zinc Apartments on. That's another great example in the city of Sydney. So when it comes to EV charging, we helped the Richmond building in Piermont do an EV charging backbone. They were the first apartment buildings to go through the New South Wales government grant program for EV charging and get some New South Wales government assistance. And they've now enabled 106 car spaces for EV charging. And Dale Cohen was the secretary of that building and he also drove a Tesla. So it was instrumental in building the momentum to do that.

More recently, we helped the rock wall apartments in Potts Point do the full EV charging backbone and they actually connected the whole EV charging system up to the fire control panel. So if there's any fire in the building for any reason, all-electric vehicle charging instantly stops. So that's one of the first things that strata buildings are grappling with is managing fire risk.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, that was going to be my next question specific to EV charging. You know, what are the challenges or the blocks that are there for buildings when they're thinking about these installations? And I was hoping that you would raise this fire question concerning risk. It's something that is constantly in my inbox, whatever I'm talking about. EV charging on the podcast. There's always somebody who's got some material, the resource, the fact sheet about fire and fire risks. So I mean, that's a great example, connecting the system to the fire panel. How else are you helping buildings to address that risk?

Brent Clark: Look, there are little things that you can do. And it's something that has to be managed, and it's about risk management. So you can't get away from the problem entirely. And it's not just while the electric vehicles are charging. The problem is if there's an electric vehicle parked in the building that doesn't have access to charging. So you know, it would be pretty draconian for buildings to start saying, you're not allowed to buy these electric vehicles, or you're not allowed to live in the building once, seven to 8% of the new cars are electric already.

So other things, you know, people are thinking you can't use fire blankets yourself, it's too dangerous, but you might purchase a fire blanket that's big enough to go over a vehicle that could be used by a first responder.

Longer term people will have another look at the fire sprinkler systems because they're not good enough to put out any of these fires. They might put in ground-level fire hydrants that can put water underneath a set of cars that are charging in a shared visitor

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area. But the idea is mitigating the risk and you're not able to take that risk away entirely.

But there are other challenges apart from the fire that we've come across. People don't necessarily want to give up visited car parking spots for shared EV charging. So there's a discussion around that. There are existing power outlets in the basement car parks that are on common power. There are plenty of examples of people stealing that power.

There are examples of early adopter chairpersons just wiring their three-phase smart charger into the house power and getting a couple of years of free energy into their vehicle because no one actually thought about it. We've got, don't know if I wanted to bring it up, but in mixed-use buildings where you've got restaurants, people are concerned about vermin being attracted to the heat of the batteries while they're charging.

So people looking at putting mats that would deter any type of wildlife from clustering underneath the hot vehicles while they're charging. Other things have been the extension leads coming out the window of second-floor apartments and going down the side of the building and into open-air car parks to charge. We've seen all these sorts of things.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, look, I think it's important to call out these challenges, to identify them so that buildings can start talking about them and how they're going to meet them, how they're going to overcome them. I know in terms of the fire risk in particular, anytime I look up whatever new resources are out there, and as I said, I've often got people sending me new things all the time, there seems to be more and more in response to that, again, with this recognition that EVs are just inarguably the way of the future, they're going to be here. So how do we best reduce that risk?

And when I'm talking to strata managers, I'm saying things like, you know, consulting with the right people at the very beginning, who are the experts in this area and making sure the equipment gets set up in the right place with the right other infrastructure around it. You know, I come back to that example, Brent, of wiring in the fire control panel, as well, that's a really neat solution. I'm sure there's many buildings that could do similar things in terms of easy access for first responders and things like that. So I think unless you're aware of the challenges and aware of the risks, you can't plan for them.

Brent Clark: There are even new electrical distribution boards coming onto the market that have like a big red stop button on the top of them that a first responder that's qualified could just go over and hit that and know that all EV charging has stopped and before they start spraying a lot of water around. And I would also say, you know, we've seen the instance of an individual owner that's got their apartment meter on the fifth floor, taking out a 99-year lease on common property to run their private power cable down to their car park area.

And I actually think that that's not a good approach to allow people to do in the future. So it's better to contain all the EV charging off a separate system that's isolated from all the apartments and doesn't have cables running up through the building and then when you've got control over it, it can all be shut down in the event of an emergency.

Amanda Farmer: And recognizing that if a building doesn't start being proactive about addressing this infrastructure and planning for its future installation, then owners with electric vehicles, visitors, and tenants with electric vehicles are just going to start charging their vehicles however they can. And yes, that in a lot of buildings of a certain age will include just plugging it into the Powerpoint that's in the garage, which is then using the common power. It's going to include running the extension cable from your front window down to the car park.

So if you don't wanna be facing those headaches, and I think once it's already starting, it's a bigger headache than if you've preempted it. Start talking about it and investigating how you might be able to get on the front foot. So to that end, Brent, tell us, can buildings work with you to be having these discussions? What do you suggest to listeners who are hearing all this thinking, oh yes, I need to get more informed about this. What do you suggest they do as a next step?

Brent Clark: Yes, so look, definitely you can come and work with Wattblock, but we've also got a ton of great free online resources. So we've got a YouTube channel that's had about 50,000 views, and we've got a number of videos up there on all these

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topics, solar batteries, EV charging, heat pumps, efficiency, and reducing fire risk in EV charging. So some great resources on our YouTube channel. We've got a free solar readiness for strata online training course, and a free EV charging readiness for online training course for strata.

We've got links to case studies. We've got a list of all the government assistance from three different levels of government that might apply to you in New South Wales. So what are all the federal grants, rebates, state government, and local council rebates, because we've got a number of local councils like Lane Cove, Kur rin gai, Waverley, and North Sydney with their own rebate programs at RAMWIC at the local council level for these electrification technologies as well.

And of course, you can join the Electrify Strata WhatsApp community, and you can jump onto those maps and have a look in your local area if you're in one of those 16 local council areas where people have started moving, and maybe you wanna speak to someone in your local area to understand their experience, get references on tradespeople that they've used.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, your website Brent is definitely a treasure trove. And I think even just in the last 12 months, it's exploded with all of this additional information as well. So what I'll get you to do Brent is to send us those key links that you've spoken to there and we'll make sure that they're all in the show notes for this episode and the mapping definitely. Let's come back to the mapping. I've had a look at those maps and incredibly simple. I can see how you've used Google Maps there to be able to highlight which buildings have this infrastructure in place.

Whether you're in a building that has solar and you wanna check that you're there on Brent's map or whether you are in a building that's looking at installing solar or EVs and you wanna know if you've got some neighbouring properties that you can have a chat to, that map's gonna be a really great first stop.

Brent Clark: The other thing I'll point out is a couple of years ago, we actually got approached by some buyer's agents for people who wanted to buy into a sustainable apartment building. And back at that point, we started creating some lists like, okay, a top 40 list of most sustainable apartment buildings in Sydney. And that was picked up by some of the online real estate sites. But this is actually you know, if you want to buy next time or invest in a more electrified, sustainable apartment building, then this is the better way to go about doing your research on where you might want to buy that next property.

Amanda Farmer: And it's absolutely the way of the future, isn't it? I mean, I can see if it's not happening already, I haven't been in the market for a little while, but if it's not happening already, that the real estate agents aren't heavily promoting those buildings that have this infrastructure in place. I can see the brochure that's got, you know, this is what the council rates are, this is what the levies are. There's a little symbol, an EV charging tick. There's a little symbol, solar tick. There's a neighbour's rating. It is all part of the marketing. It's all part of that story, that sales story for a building, which is an owner as an investor. To me, that's just so important.

Brent Clark: We're already aware of maybe seven apartment buildings in Sydney that have solar-powered EV charging. And I think that's something that will set your building apart.

Amanda Farmer: I'm filing that one away Brent, because I said this on a Friday Live a few weeks ago that my building is now starting on the solar journey and it was discussed at our AGM very recently and the committee member who's leading the charge said, look, we're going to need solar to run those EVs. So hopefully we'll be entering that club very soon.

Brent Clark: Sounds great, Amanda.

Amanda Farmer: Anything you want to add before we wrap up Brent?

Brent Clark: Look, obviously it's great that we've got now New South Wales government grant funding assistance for EV charging. I'm also inspired by the Victorian government putting a grant program of \$16 million out for shared solar on apartment buildings in Victoria and I'm really inspired by ACT government putting \$3.6 million out there for solar on apartment buildings in the ACT as

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well. So let's hope that this government assistance keeps flowing into strata and eventually lowers the cost of living crisis for renters in our apartment buildings.

Amanda Farmer: Hear, hear to that. Thank you very much for your time. Brent Clark from Wattblock.

Brent Clark: Thanks, Amanda, great to come along. Catch you later, bye.

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 yourstrataproperty.com.au.



Demystifying the legal complexities of apartment living.