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Subject The Commons

Interview Location Melbourne, Australia

Interviewee



Jeremy McLeod
Director, Breathe Architecture (JM)

Interviewer

Dr Josh Byrne (JB)
Research Fellow, Curtin University and the CRC for Low Carbon Living

Transcript

JB: Can you start by giving us your name and your role at Breathe Architecture?

JM: My name is Jeremy McLeod I'm the Director of Breathe Architecture.

JB: So where did The Commons originally start from as a concept?

JM: I used to work in a large practice, so I guess before I started there I studied environmental design. Then I went on to study architecture, I thought I'd be housing people. The last project I worked on at that big practice was, the last six weeks in that practice I was working on a carpark, in the basement for the building. And I thought to myself, is that really where I wanted to spend my time; housing cars. So, not really.

So I started my own practice in 2001, we called it Breathe Architecture with the simple idea that every room, every habitable room would have an openable window. Because I'd been working on projects where there weren't windows in some of the rooms. So, I guess that's where we started.

In the years leading up to The Commons, from 2000 through to 2007, I'd been working on a series of multi-residential projects where they were developer driven projects, designed to investor specifications, to be sold to investors and to rented back to my fellow citizens at the highest possible rent. At no point through that process did anyone care about the outcome of the people living in those apartments. So, when we started to talk to our developer clients about why aren't you delivering owner-occupier apartments, there was no appetite for them to do that so we thought that we would build a precedent, Australia's flagship sustainable apartment building, that was simultaneously affordable, liveable, and sustainable.

It didn't sound that hard, we were naïve and idealistic and inexperienced, so we had no idea how hard that would be. We bought this site in the year after the Kevin O'Keefe election, everyone was talking about price on carbon, sustainability was on the forefront of everyone's mind. It seemed totally obvious to us that something needed to happen, something needed to change and so, we would do that. So, we started work on that project, it took us six and a half years to complete. And when we finished it we had a building that was not as good as we'd hoped, we'd hoped for a carbon-free building.

As you've probably seen at The Commons it's car-free but not carbon-free, here's gas fired solar hot water here, we couldn't get the all-electric system to work. We've only got 5 Kilowatts of solar, we couldn't get the 20 Kilowatts that we wanted. Although we didn't reach the benchmark we wanted, it's still pretty good. In 2014, it was awarded the most sustainable apartment building in Australia, it won the National award for multi-residential housing, so, we're quite happy with the outcome. It could have been better, and so we're trying again with Nightingale.

JB: So describe how you moved from The Commons to Nightingale One, what was the genesis of that next step?

JM: When we completed The Commons, Bonnie and I decided that we would open the building up, and try and share as much information as we could in the building. We took a series of tours through the building and it seemed to gain momentum and every weekend there were people asking for tours, and other developers and architects asking us to come through the building. So we thought we would open the building up Open House Melbourne day, we spoke to the residents and all the Commoners said, yep, let's open it up. We opened the building up and we had over 1,000 people come through on one Saturday and it was incredible. And it was intimidating and it was overpowering.

After that we started to collect names, people were contacting us saying, if you do another apartment building like that can you let me know because I would like to buy an apartment like that. So, when that list got to over ten, we thought, ok, maybe we actually need to start looking at how do we replicate this model.

We'd been hoping that through some of the tours that some of our other colleagues or some developers would see it and take the model and run with it, but we didn't see a lot of appetite in the market because the status quo, delivering investor stock, and selling it either offshore or to other investors, as long as that's profitable there's no reason to change.

So, what we found at the end of The Commons was that the architecture in The Commons is, um, there's no real ground breaking architectural moves in this building. All this building is, is a series of research pieces done from buildings in Germany, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Sweden, you know, we just found great buildings, great precedents around the world and kind of bought them all together here.

So, as lucky as we were to win all those awards, we don't really deserve it. But I think what was different about The Commons was that the intent was set early, and we decided early that we wanted to make a building that was a triple bottom line project, and that it was a housing project, not an investment piece.

So, Nightingale is actually a financial model. Nightingale housing exists to be able to essentially disconnect the people with the money that are currently making all the decisions in housing in our country and instead reconnect architects with the residents, the people who will live there.

Fundamentally it's a financial model that puts the architect at the centre and it couples them with 25 ethical investors who will put in a small amount of money each. They get a financial return which is capped at 15 percent but they also get a social return. And at the backend of that the architect takes his direction or takes her direction on the project from the residents, the people who will live there, rather than from the money man on the other side of the table. So it starts to deliver housing for the occupants, rather than product for profit.

JB: Do you think it's the financial model behind typical multi-residential housing that's been delivered at the moment that is responsible for its poor quality? Is it really the financial model rather than a lack of design capacity or skill or commitment, but the models fundamentally flawed do you believe?

JM: There's nothing wrong with the financial model, it's about what you decide to use it on. Currently the people that make decisions ... so, in the 80's, in Victoria for example, the State Government gave up on public housing, on housing for people, they handed it over to the free market. And so since then we've been relying solely on the property industry to deliver housing.

But generally this doesn't exist for everyone, generally speaking, the sole purpose of somebody involved in the property industry is to make money, make profit, not to deliver housing. So, the very function of the property industry is first and foremost to make profit, and secondly if that profitable product requires someone to live in it, then so be it. So I think that our entire country has been relying on a commodity market rather than a housing market.

What Nightingale does is it sets very, very clear benchmarks, so it has five guiding principles, that each Nightingale project has to meet. And they are triple bottom line principles. So, it has to be seven and a half star thermally rated, it has to be fossil fuel free, it has to have an embedded network which buys renewable energy only, it has to have a capped profit on the cost at 15 percent, and it has to be financially transparent so everyone can see how much the project costs from start to finish, so, as a resident you know how much the land costs, how much the architect is getting paid, how much profit is getting paid to those early equity investors, and lastly, there needs to be engagement with the residents so they know for them they have some agency in the housing that they're buying into.

The current financial market that's being used by property developers to deliver housing can be used to deliver quality housing, it's just not high up on the priority list. In fact, I would suggest it's relatively low on the priority list.