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Subject Christie Walk

Interview Location Melbourne, Australia

Interviewee



Paul Downton (PD)
Architect, Urban Ecology Australia

Interviewer

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

Transcript

JB: Can you start by telling us your name and your role with the Christie Walk project?

PD: My name is Paul Downton and I was the architect, part of the building company, part of the group that initiated the whole project and I was the convenor of Urban Ecology Australia at the time. I was involved in lots of different ways including a number of years as a resident.

JB: Take us back to before the project began, what was its origin, how did it get underway?

PD: In 1988 the Hawke Government held the greenhouse 88 conference right across Australia, that was about climate change. 1988, it was really good, really intelligent. It was all about attacking the issues, whatever they were. There were conferences running in every city including Adelaide and we ran our bit in Adelaide.

The greenhouse conference in Adelaide we picked up the issue of the built environment because that wasn't really getting any focus at the time. There were nine sections to do with greenhouse, everyone talked about that along with global warming, the built environment wasn't there and I thought well it needs to be .. it's just about the biggest impact we have, through our cities and the way we build things.

We formed a group called the Greenhouse Association Australia, it was probably the first dedicated community or association on climate change in Australia so it formed in 1989, from that we got a lot of interest in this idea of the built environment being key and I talked about eco cities. That got picked up by a number of people.

In 1990 we formed something called Urban Ecology Australia which was a direct spin off from all the interest in the built environment and how it impacted on the rest of the environment. Urban Ecology Australia was all about creating eco cities, now in 1990 if you said eco city people looked at you funny, isn't that an oxymoron? You can't have city and eco side by side, we've learnt better of course but I guess we were in a sense pioneering some of the ideas there and it got people excited it was a really energy, energising thing. Which was important because one of the things that came out of the 88 conference was concern about negativity, you can really be easily negative, bring people down, walk into a cheerful room start being negative you can bring everybody down, it's that easy, it's maybe a little harder to bring everybody up and keep positive.

Climate Change is such a big deal, the impact is so enormous when you think about it, it's easy to get depressed so it's about how you can do something positive...our solution was eco cities, let's build our cities in a way that fits the environment, fits the cycles of nature and provides beautiful and nice places for people to live in, it's that simple in concept but we ran in 92 the second international eco city conference, people from 21 different countries, it was the beginning of what I still think of as the eco city movement.

Nowadays people are talking about sustainable cities, I prefer the eco city because it describes more of what it is, you're talking about ecological cities. Sustainable tends to mean whatever everybody wants it to mean which is a bit dangerous.

From that Urban Ecology Australia was committed to the idea of building eco cities. The city council in Adelaide had a depot that they were going to vacate, we learnt that through a friend of ours on council at the time and it was like, well we're looking for a place to do a little trial, a pilot project somewhere. They said well there's this whole city block, and we thought well that'll do and our initial feeling was to take a little bit of the city and try to build a piece of an eco-city. We had about a dozen households or more interested in coming together to do that but it grew like topsy through Urban Ecology Australia and I put up some images and proposals of what could be done to the whole city block.

That seemed to get people fired up, we ended up over a period of 8 years having a centre for Urban Ecology there, which was Halifax Street, which was what the depot was named after and we had hundreds of volunteers over that period and we were all about trying to show what you could really do. On that city block, a piece of what the whole city could be if it pursued the principals of ecological city making.

And those principals were always, always, not just about the solar panels, taking care of the water properly, doing all those things that people fairly quickly come to nowadays, it was more about creating a community, and helping generate the culture needed in the community to drive ecological or sustainable development into the future because it isn't going to be done by bits and pieces of technology it's going to happen once there's a culture that says we want to do this. And I like to think that's beginning to happen now.

Anyway the Halifax eco city project was a bigger project than was likely to happen with us involved although it nearly did, that's a whole other story, but one of the spin offs from it was that there were enough people with enough commitment to say well hell let's do it anyway, let's find the site somewhere else in the city, cause we were determined to do it in the middle of the city, eco this, eco that. Sustainable always kind of going out to the fringes where there's room to move, we were following the view that the city is the focus.

The city is the key, maybe a harder one to work on but if we can't get our cities right, the dense cores of our cities right then you can kiss goodbye to the rest. So, we had enough people to

make it possible to think about doing it. It was presented as a bit of a collective self-build. These were people that would have gone and bought a house or built one in the suburbs just outside the city, but they bought into the idea that if we brought all our resources together that we had as individual citizens and families, we could become a defacto developer and we did, and that's how Christie Walk started.

JB: So it started as a concept of a whole city block but you ended up with a much smaller site?

PD: Yeah, in a sense it started off as a concept of a whole city. What do you do to make the whole city work ecologically, fit in nature's cycles etc and support human community and it ended up being a little bite sized chunk, that we as a group of citizens, could get our teeth around and work with.

JB: Can you take us through the design process, how you tackled a site that size and then the governance process, how as a group you organised the development.

PD: With the Halifax eco city project, the whole city block proposal, part of the idea there was that it would be developed in bite sized chunks. Rather than have a developer do the whole lot in a time-honoured manner, it was to be more responsive, more subtle, more diverse and so the thinking, which I was very keen on, was that you would have lots of individual, small developers, each able to have their own effect on the process. So it would have that kind of richness and diversity that you would get in real communities.

Normally it happens over decades or centuries that's how funky little towns that people like to visit for their holidays, that's how they evolve, so how can you kind of collapse that process and intensify it quick enough to actually do a development. That was the thinking behind it, so the Halifax project that larger site was designed to have these bits, and there was a bit within it that more or less fit for what Christie Walk became.

Christie Walk was a little trickier because it didn't have the benefit of neighbouring, more of the same idea, it had to fit in an existing place and it was a T shaped, an awkward little block but again my view was, that's great, because it's got to be able to be done in the difficult, awkward, left over.

The difficult places are where it gets interesting, as an architect I tend to think that way, you know, what can we do with this, and the thing in the back of my mind was, well you can't go out on a nice greenfield site, face the sun, put out the shading verandas and all the rest of it, which everybody was starting to get familiar with the idea that that was the way to go for solar housing etc which was part of the agenda. But what if you can't do that? What if you're stuck with city streets? What if you're stuck facing west? Facing east? Or there's a house 3 metres away from your front door, you can't use those classic solar design principals.

I saw Christie Walk as an opportunity to demonstrate how you could make things work climatically in terms of climate response of buildings, in that really tight, difficult environment where some of the buildings had to face west, some of them had to face east, and it was very tight, there wasn't a length or depth for the sun to come pouring through your front door. And that made it interesting.

JB: How did you go about getting the density in an inner-city site like that and having common space, green space in particular, which has been very successful there.

PD: That's the key word, the collective, common, green space is what makes it possible. If you treat a site like that, in the way that developers were treating them, which was like, how do we get the cars in? You're almost straight away into trouble because cars are big, awkward things, polluting, they need a lot of room to move and as soon as you bring them into a tight environment you've got trouble, you can see that over and over again.

Now my reference was back historically to pre-industrial revolution, pre-internal combustion engine movement, so it was to do when people moved around with animals or on foot and that changes the scale of things, it changes it enormously.

And also the reference of things like the garden city movement and if you look at the materials that were coming out then, of how to make quite compact cities, the density of the garden city, this was Howards idea. I'm not saying that the garden city is the solution to everything but it was an interesting one to reference because the density of the garden city, which people think of still as a suburban concept, was actually pretty tight, it was equivalent to traditional Asian and European towns. It's not a spread out suburban thing at all. So, the density of Christie Walk was pretty much in the realm of what was being proposed in the garden city and the original concept of it and its very much the traditional density of towns and cities that was pretty much all that period before the car.

JB: The governance model behind it, how was the funding generated and how did that differ in terms of delivery in more conventional development.

PD: We worked on a lot of ideas in the Halifax eco city project process, we were looking at everything you can think of in terms of alternative economics and ways of doing things that didn't get you stuck with business as usual.

Funding and financial models, turns out you can't really escape that within the present system... it was worth a shot, to try and get away from it a bit. What we adopted in the end was a cooperative model, as profit wasn't an issue, making surplus to put back into the project, yes.

It wasn't about a developer making a quid and disappearing onto the next job, it was about being in place, focussing on the place, reinvesting back into the place and it was about the people involved putting their money, their energy to kind of nurture and nourish the thing over time.

So, that was the background thinking, we used what vehicle was available to us. In SA the cooperative system is typically government funded self-managed cooperatives, but we weren't government funded at all, it was totally self-funded from the community and from some borrowings that were made. We were able to get started, so we started an urban ecology, spawned, which was a cooperative that took up the task of developing the Christie Walk site.

We were able to get the necessary deposit to hold the site because we had a sugar daddy, Beverley Vawn, who's a wonderful man, unfortunately he died before the project was completed, but he was key to being able to get going because he was prepared to put his money where his beliefs were for us all to be able to move forward from there. Without him it wouldn't have happened.

But it did and after that input and that support we were able borrow initially from the Community Aid Abroad Ethical Investment Trust, so we were trying to make sure the money was doing a good job as well, We were looking for as much integrity as we could achieve, I guess we got part of the way there. The Community Aid Abroad Ethical Investment Trust, it was the first

time they had ever funded real estate. I think they eventually stopped doing that, it got taken over by Bendigo Bank. Very much a community bank and they provided the funding for the project.

JB: With funding in place, getting into design, I'm assuming there was some participation from residents in that design process?

PD: There was, we did that through something I was calling the Barefoot Architecture program, where we brought people in constantly to look at how they would like to build within that framework and the idea was that it wasn't going to be cookie cutter, it wasn't going to be standard, the idea was that people would be engaged at some level.

As an architect, I must have been insane to think that way, but it was a great time and it carried on through into Christie Walk, but the Christie Walk initial design that I did was informed by all that previous discussion and input from people. So, what I did was do something that I thought fitted the place and fitted the feedback I was getting from people and the individual units were taken up.

Some of the units were specifically designed for individuals at the time but everybody involved got a chance to have their say about how the various apartments or the townhouses were finished. So there was room within the design framework I was using to make adjustments and to have flexibility, particularly flexibility over time and so the floor plans from a stage two apartment with the roof garden on top, you can treat those as a completely open space which I believe one of the apartments still is or you can divide it into several small rooms.

So it's all on the same basic structure...but there's a lot of flexibility in the floor plan and that was again part of the thinking that we didn't want to lock everyone into. You know this is the unit but overtime it's possible to share things around and the internal walls are mostly non-load bearing so that you can knock them down and move them around. So all of that kind of thing was going on underneath the design process, people were having their say about individual places and we put in a lot of time, but it resulted in something that wasn't cookie cutter.

JB: You lived there for a while, did it live up to your aspirations?

PD: I think it did, it's easier from a distance, than it was being there because Cherrie, my wife, she and I were living in the thing 24/7, which is quite a strain actually and it takes its toll. There's a lot of time and a lot of input from different people and that's not the easiest thing to deal with. While we were there, there was a fair bit of that and people were lovely but it was quite intense from our point of view.

Nevertheless, it clearly still had a village feel to it and going back and visiting in subsequent years as I have, it's been fantastic, it's not just that it looks like I was hoping it might, And the vegetation has come through even better than I hoped it would, but there's a real community and you can kind of feel it. So, yeah, it's worked extremely well in lots of ways.

JB: There's been enormous interest in it, were you surprised by that interest? What do you think is driving that interest? Why is it so unique?

PD: Initially, yes, there was a lot of interest from the very beginning. The Federal government included it as an example in the *Your Home* technical manual. And it had a lot of interest from different parts of the media, not so much interest incidentally from the architectural community because it didn't have the fashionable style for the time.

It had a lot of interest, I was actually disappointed in the interest in the ideas of what it was about wasn't greater. I was disappointed that the model we worked on so hard to develop, didn't get picked up sooner and adopted more readily and I was disappointed, but I shouldn't be surprised in retrospect that the development community didn't get it really, they didn't understand the point of it.

It wasn't about maximising profit and quite honestly most of the developers, that's all they're interested in. So, there is a need for the developer community to mature and develop I think, and it's beginning to show signs of that as I think some of the other projects you are looking at demonstrate.

JB: Do you think that maturity in development is the result of the market expecting more now?

PD: I hope so, as I said earlier, the idea of the whole underlying ethos to the project right back through to the very beginning was about trying to get a cultural shift. So that people would be expecting their homes to work without making massive damage to the environment. They would expect to enjoy community as part of where they live not as an added extra if you're lucky but as an integral part of the way their lifestyle was being housed. It was my hope that it would contribute to shifting of thinking, so hopefully it has helped contribute.