



inner city living

Above: An artist's impression of the Christie Walk development in Adelaide

Opposite (clockwise from top left): A community space for informal or small groups featuring a sundial; a view of a house taken across the community produce garden; work taking place on the car park/courtyard space; residents tolerate 'sticky beaking' by thousands of visitors and dozens of tour groups (especially schools) keen to learn about ecological architecture, urbanism and community; a path leading through the development; and preparing the roof garden for planting with native grasses

PREVAILING CONDITIONS IN Australia favour suburban sprawl with inefficient, gas-guzzling, water-profligate housing spread thinly over huge areas with little opportunity for the development of community. If people meet it is by arrangement – there is little scope for informal meetings in the wide streets dominated by speeding cars. Meanwhile, inner-city living generally neglects to provide any green spaces and is seen as unsuitable for children and families, with no safe places to play, meet, and socialise.

Christie Walk in Adelaide, South Australia (SA), was built in order to address some of these issues. It grew from the work of Urban Ecology Australia (UEA), founded in 1991 as a community-based organisation committed to the creation of 'ecological cities'. UEA initiated the creation of Wirranendi, a not-for-profit housing cooperative, to develop EcoCity projects and the 2,000m² Christie Walk – named in honour of the memory of life-long social and environmental activist Scott Christie – has been its successful result.

When the Christie Walk project began in 1999, it was intended to demonstrate that it is possible to address most environmental issues through the planning and development of the built environment – and that social sustainability, the support of community processes and the making of convivial places, is integral to achieving this possibility. With elements of traditional

CHRISTIE WALK IN ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA SHOWS HOW SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY CAN BE ACHIEVED THROUGH PUBLIC SPACE DESIGN. ARCHITECT PAUL DOWNTON REPORTS

urban and village form, the project approaches inner-city living in a way that challenges current trends towards sprawl and inefficient resource use.

The main features

Christie Walk is a community-titled development. As well as owning their own property, residents share in the common property on the site. The project will eventually include:

- Twenty-seven dwellings of various types and configurations (four, two/three storey strawbale houses; four, three storey townhouses; and six apartments built to date, with 13 new apartments and community facilities about to commence);
- Healthy, non-toxic, construction and passive solar/climate responsive building design in a severely restricted urban setting;
- The capturing and use of stormwater for irrigation and toilet flushing and

on-site treatment and use of sewage effluent for irrigation (currently decommissioned);

- Solar hot water to all dwellings, including multi-level apartments;
- Photovoltaics (provided in the stage three development phase);
- Unrestricted pedestrian access (this is not a 'gated community') and proximity to all city amenities – maximising the benefits of existing urban infrastructure;
- Shared facilities – stage three will see the creation of a kitchen, laundry, library, meeting space and toilets.

Compared with a current conventional development proposal for the same sized site Christie Walk provides:

- More housing (27 units rather than 24) and a more productive landscape (one third of the site, plus roof garden rather than just ten per cent);
- More resource conservation and higher energy efficiencies (25 per cent of normal SA summer running costs, according to initial research results),
- More community space and social interaction (none provided at all in a conventional scheme);
- More capture of stormwater (all water captured on-site rather than none); capture and treatment of effluent (although the system is currently decommissioned); and renewable energy capture and use (enough to heat water and, eventually, power the entire site – compared with no renewable use at all).



All images: Ecopolis Architects



Above: Townhouses covered in vegetation. The site originally only had a few weeds, an untended grape vine, and a small overgrown grass area. The green spaces and use of plants in the development have contributed to a significant increase in biodiversity on the site

◀ The ecology of space

There's an ancient quotation from Lao Tse that draws attention to the space inside a cup as its salient feature – its hollowness is the attribute that makes the object useful as a cup. So it is with buildings – the spaces contained by the walls are what make the walls worth erecting. The same applies to the space between buildings, particularly in an urban context. It's that space between the buildings that forms the public and community realm, and determines whether a town or city can come alive and be something other than a mere assemblage of objects.

The 'modern movement' placed so much emphasis on the object in space – the building – that the spaces between were often neglected. We are still reeling from the impact of that ideological legacy. Fortunately, the rising star of sustainability is prompting a rethink about the why and how of our built environment and there is a growing coterie of architects and planners who understand that sustainability is about ecology, and is inevitably about the relationship of people and place.

Green spaces are integral to the design of Christie Walk, an essential part of making the buildings work and provide appropriate containers for the social exchange that is community. Some spaces are for small meetings, some encourage casual encounter – it is almost impossible to pass by someone at Christie Walk and not greet them.

The garden spaces are all shared by the community and have different emphases although they all share the purpose of providing aesthetic amenity, habitat (especially for birds and insects) and contributing to micro-climate modification. The site originally only had a few weeds, an untended grape vine and a small overgrown grass area prior to redevelopment, now the extensive garden space and potted plants have contributed to a significant increase in biodiversity on the site. The green spaces include:

- The community produce garden for organic produce. Two years of productive gardening has already taken place, with the garden at the centre of much community interaction;
- The roof garden, a 'real' roof garden – where soil covers the entire roof area to a significant depth. By the end of 2005 this green space will provide aesthetic and social amenity, support productive landscape, contribute to microclimate modification, capture water, and capture solar energy for hot water and electricity;
- General landscape creation. In the indigenous Kaurua, Wirranendi means 'becoming or returning to bushland' and this is reflected in the many native and indigenous plants;
- Parking courtyards. There is much less car parking than is usual in similar developments and what there is has been designed as courtyard space – comfortable for people as well as navigable for vehicular access. Stage three has been designed and has received development approval with no on-site car parking – almost unprecedented according to urban transport researcher Prof Peter Newman. Urban environments build up a patina of pattern and texture from a continuous history of intimate human engagement with place-making. As architect of Christie Walk, I wanted to accelerate this process. Residents have been encouraged to make their mark on

the project individually and collectively – to occupy the place with evidence of their presence and provide 'instant patina'. The 'working bees' that contribute to the practical completion of landscape elements in the shared/communal areas also create social focus.

Design and development processes have engaged the residents in an attempt to ensure ownership, understanding and input to the shared/communal areas, and many volunteers have contributed to Christie Walk, organising, building and landscaping. Friendships and continuing involvement are typical outcomes of this volunteerism.

The boundaries of development

A building is not a place; it can be an important part of a place and may be its most visible manifestation, but it is just the means of defining boundaries for human activities. The only way to provide community green spaces on tight inner-city sites is to include multi-level apartments as well as townhouses.

Christie Walk demonstrates how this mix of built form can release space between buildings to provide amenity value and efficient resource utilisation. But apartment building is avoided by many developers in Australia because of the high cost of borrowing and the difficulty of selling them when banks only lend 60 per cent on apartment mortgages, rather than the 90 per cent plus for houses on their own patch of land.

Despite community efforts over a number of years and the Lord Mayor of the City of Adelaide's assertion that, "the project is exemplary and gives developers a clear sign of the elements the council wants to see in future city urban design", it has yet to be replicated.

Meanwhile, Christie Walk provides some evidence that making appropriate green spaces for plants and healthy social environments is possible, even in the heart of a modern capitalist-pragmatist city. ■



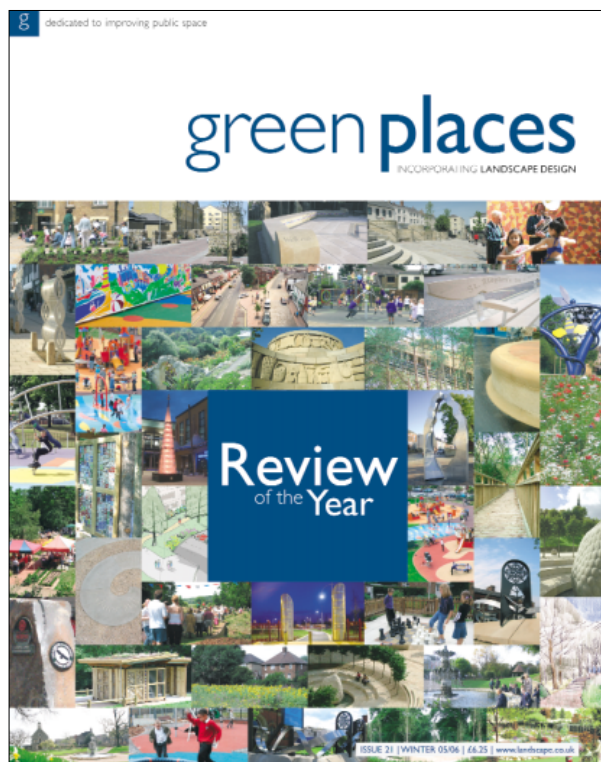
Architect and designer Paul Downton is principal architect and urban ecologist with Ecopolis Architects – specialists in ecological architecture and urban design – and founding convener of Urban Ecology Australia, an award-winning, community, non-profit organisation. Downton's awards include the 1994 'World's best Eco-city project' award. He has been teaching for over 25 years, two of them in Jordan, and is a professional

writer on architecture, environment, technology and the arts.

Email: paul@ecopolis.com.au

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