

Christie Walk



“It’s not a utopia. It’s a working example of what you can do in a real place with real people.”

Paul Downton, Architect, Christie Walk.

eco-dream an incredible

Christie Walk is tucked away in a pocket of Adelaide’s city centre, just behind Sturt Street. It might be hidden amongst anonymous apartment and townhouse developments, but it is a beacon pointing to an ecologically sustainable future and an alternative way of living. Christie Walk was a finalist in the World Habitat Awards 2005, run by the Building and Social Housing Foundation.

The project was born of the remains of Urban Ecology Australia’s Halifax Project, a much larger development that showed massive levels of community and council support for sustainable development, but stopped short of becoming a reality.

Despite its unfortunate demise, the Halifax Project showed there was a genuine, committed interest in sustainable living bubbling away in Adelaide. The results can be seen today in a cluster of aerated concrete and straw-bale houses and apartment buildings nestled amongst gardens that form meeting places

and opportunities for Christie Walk residents to work side-by-side.

Two people who helped make Christie Walk happen are University of Adelaide graduates; Paul Downton, the architect, who has a PhD from Adelaide, and Effie Best, who achieved her Bachelor of Science (Hons) in 1954. Downton’s studies were about ‘ecological cities’ under the auspices of Geography and Environmental Studies (his Architecture degree is from Wales) and Best’s ongoing interest in ecology saw her become one of the editors of seminal Australian high school textbook, *Biological Science: The Web of Life*.

Along with a handful of others committed to the idea of eco-cities, they have formed the backbone of the project, with Downton designing the project and providing its theoretical base, and Best in recent years chairing the cooperative that acted as developer to create a development that is run by its community in a much more hands-on way than a standard, strata-titled apartment complex.

Downton describes the experience of bringing Christie Walk to life as an incredible learning process.

“Christie Walk has been created as a model for environmentally sustainable living in the city. The entire project has been a fascinating learning process, where we became developers, builders – whatever was needed to carry the project forward,” Downton said.

“We challenged the conventional approach to development by taking an almost traditional approach to building.”

The project came together, physically, through the cooperative effort of owners and workers committed to seeing the environmental principles of the project come to life.

“None of us had ever been a developer before. It is a brutal industry to be in, but everyone involved had an attitude that was almost antithetical to the industry.

“What we have learned can be used by other groups to create similar projects. We host tours through here



journey

for groups who are interested in doing the same thing," Downton said.

The differences between Christie Walk and a mainstream development occur at every level. Best and Downton outlined these on a tour of the site.

"Christie Walk has more density than a conventional development. There is community space and common space that includes productive as well as decorative garden areas that the residents work on together. There are several natural 'meeting places' in the garden area that become resting areas during working bees, and just lately there has been a group of residents who meet for a few glasses of wine in the evenings," Best said.

"This community attitude towards the garden space also improves security, as people who live here all know each other and keep an eye out. There is public access through the garden, and people often ask questions about Christie Walk as they walk through. By the same token, if anyone was hanging around or acting

suspiciously, it would be very hard for them not to be noticed," she added.

The apartment building at Christie Walk features a roof garden. This may not seem like an unusual concept, except that it is a genuine garden with deep soil covering the whole roof.

"The roof garden acts as insulation for apartments on the top floor that, in a typical apartment building, would be very hot during summer and dependent on air-conditioning. The layer of soil and plants forms a barrier against the heat and provides another gardening area and meeting place. We have an excellent view of the New Year's Eve fireworks up here. It is really delightful through the summer," Downton explained.

"This insulation works alongside the natural cross-ventilation and passive solar management that has been designed into the buildings. Even the vines on the balconies serve a purpose, providing extra shade during summer, dropping their leaves in winter, allowing more sunlight in to heat the dwellings."

The project performs well above

building code requirements, capturing stormwater for garden irrigation and toilet-flushing. All dwellings use solar hot water. Stage three of the project will see solar energy captured to generate electricity.

The location of Christie Walk means it is within walking distance to the Central Market, public transport, and CBD offices. This makes cars a less important part of life for the residents.

Effie Best said, "One of the great things about Christie Walk is that it is not centred around driving and parking cars. This has meant we have more space to live in, with a few car parking spaces on the perimeter of the block. There is also ample street parking in the area for visitors.

"Christie Walk feels like an oasis. There are plants, birds; people walk past one another as we move to and from our dwellings. The second and third floor apartments have two balconies so residents can spend time on the balcony that faces inwards, or on one that looks outwards over the pathway so they can interact with the other residents." ►



Christie Walk eco-dream an incredible journey

story continued

► "I love looking out of my living room windows and being able to say hello to my neighbours. Living here requires a commitment and extra work, but we are rewarded in so many ways."

Downton sums up the Christie Walk experience, saying, "A project like this requires interested people, investment without an expectation about the bottom line or government support to drive the outcome. These conditions all need to be aligned. That's why there's not another Christie Walk, yet."

"Many of us did not initially appreciate the critical element of time, which resulted in cost blow-outs. The project has taken three years longer to come to fruition than was originally expected, and this was during a time when construction costs were rising."

"It was almost a magical moment of enough people coming together with enough resilience to see the project through."

"It was quite a journey. One that maybe not a lot of people are prepared to make yet, but one that is becoming increasingly necessary." ■

Story Lisa Reid

architect

Australian experience builds global perspective

Architecture graduate Francis Wong is one of many success stories to emerge from the Colombo Plan, and one who counts his "Australian experience" as a major factor in his successful career.

The father of Senator Penny Wong – Australia's first Chinese-Australian woman to be elected a Labor MP – received his B Arch (Hons) in 1967 and has since practised as an architect in Sabah, Malaysia.

Beginning in 1950, the Colombo Plan – pushed energetically by Australia – saw Commonwealth countries pro-actively assisting in the development of newly independent Asian nations such as India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).

A significant proportion of the foreign aid involved scholarships to Britain, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, and thousands of students took advantage of them. An estimated 18,000 to 20,000 Colombo Scholars ventured to Australian universities between 1950 and the mid-1980s.

For Francis Wong, the Colombo Plan provided a great deal of comfort.

"In the 1960s, the Australian public was extremely humanitarian and Christian in their relationship with

Asian students. And the Colombo Plan office, at the University of Adelaide, was a real comfort to us because they genuinely cared for our needs.

"This kind of support never wavered even when we got entangled with the law for not declaring a transistor radio to Customs," he said.

The Customs incident is still fresh in his mind, although he concedes being ashamed of his stupidity. "The Colombo Plan Chief Executive saved the day when he convinced the Customs officials not to take further action."

Francis says the Colombo Plan offered opportunities for poverty-stricken students from third-world countries to obtain the best education, and then use this knowledge in the development of their respective countries.

"Because the selection of the Colombo Plan was based on academic ability, it ensured a high success rate, therefore minimising the cost of manpower development."