

Institutions and Social Change: implementing co-operative housing and environmentally sustainable development at Christie Walk

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Abstract

How can institutions contribute to the building of civil society in the twenty-first century? It is clear that the old laissez-faire approach and the more recent neo-conservative reliance on the market have failed to deliver housing for many people. On the other hand the state-based welfare housing model espoused by the Australian Labor Party over the twentieth century has also been beset by problems. Social alienation and the crisis in affordable housing make the case that individualist approaches to urban living are not working. More communal solutions are needed – solutions attuned to a complex view of civil society outlined by Michael Edwards' tripartite definition. At the same time the onset of global warming now prompts Australians to create more environmentally sustainable ways of living. Addressing the theme of responsibility, this paper focuses on citizenship in its broader environmental, social and active forms. It analyses interviews and documentary evidence concerning the planning and development of Christie Walk, an innovative, medium density eco-city development in Adelaide. The investigation reveals the effects of some Australian institutions on residents' efforts to live socially and environmentally sustainable lives in an urban environment. The paper offers transdisciplinary research and analysis, linking the fields of history, urban housing, community development and environmental theory.

Introduction

It is evident that both the old laissez-faire approach and the more recent neo-conservative reliance on the market have failed to deliver housing for many people. The state-based welfare housing model espoused by the Australian Labor Party over the twentieth century has also been beset by problems. Social alienation, and the crisis in affordable housing make the case that individualist approaches to urban living are not working. More communal solutions are needed – solutions attuned to more complex views of civil society outlined by Michael Edwards' tripartite definition. At the same time the onset of climate change now prompts Australians to create more environmentally sustainable ways of living.¹

The eco-city approach is considerably at odds with the mainstream for-profit sector. Eco-city developments are 'built to fit [their] place in co-operation with nature rather than in conflict

¹ The authors wish to thank Dr Paul Downton, urban ecologist and architect of Christie Walk for his comments and suggestions during the writing of this paper.

with it' They are designed to strike a balance between the need for people to live, 'whilst keeping the cycles of atmosphere, water, nutrients and biology'. In short, they aim to achieve social and environmental sustainability, integrating plans for co-operation and social justice with strategies to minimise the environmental footprint of the city (Carlin et al. 2007, p.5; Walter, Arkin, Crenshaw 1993). Residential eco-city sites are therefore designed for co-operative living (as in independent co-operative housing or cohousing sites). At the same time, they attempt to reduce the carbon footprint of the site, both during the construction phase, as well as during daily life upon completion. Here we inquire into the role that institutions have played in the shaping of civil society in Australia and address this question in terms of efforts to implement eco-city ideas during construction and to encourage their continuation in daily living.

Method

This paper examines one case study— a recently-completed innovative co-operative medium-density eco-city development, Christie Walk in Adelaide. It investigates the processes of planning, building, development and community living at Christie Walk, drawing on documentary records and oral history interviews. In addition, digital research was conducted in early 2009 into a variety of traditional Australian media sources and also new media, identifying circulation of articles and programs, in print, radio and television, which mentioned Christie Walk between 2000 and 2008. Reflecting on this range of evidence, the paper asks how have Australian institutions impacted upon the efforts of a group of citizens to put in place a housing development in which they might live socially and environmentally sustainable lives?

We will first investigate something of the history and development of Christie Walk at the same time asking how successful is it in terms of its position in civil society, its environmental sustainability and its cohousing aspirations? We will move on to explore its success as a template for other similar developments, asking how have Australian institutions helped and hindered Christie Walk?

Christie Walk: the Building of a Community

What does the eco-city approach imply and how well does Christie Walk implement its aims? Christie Walk is a community of twenty seven houses and apartments of diverse size and

form, located within the square mile of Adelaide city on a T-shaped block of land of 2000 square metres, the area of three average suburban housing blocks. It was completed in 2007.

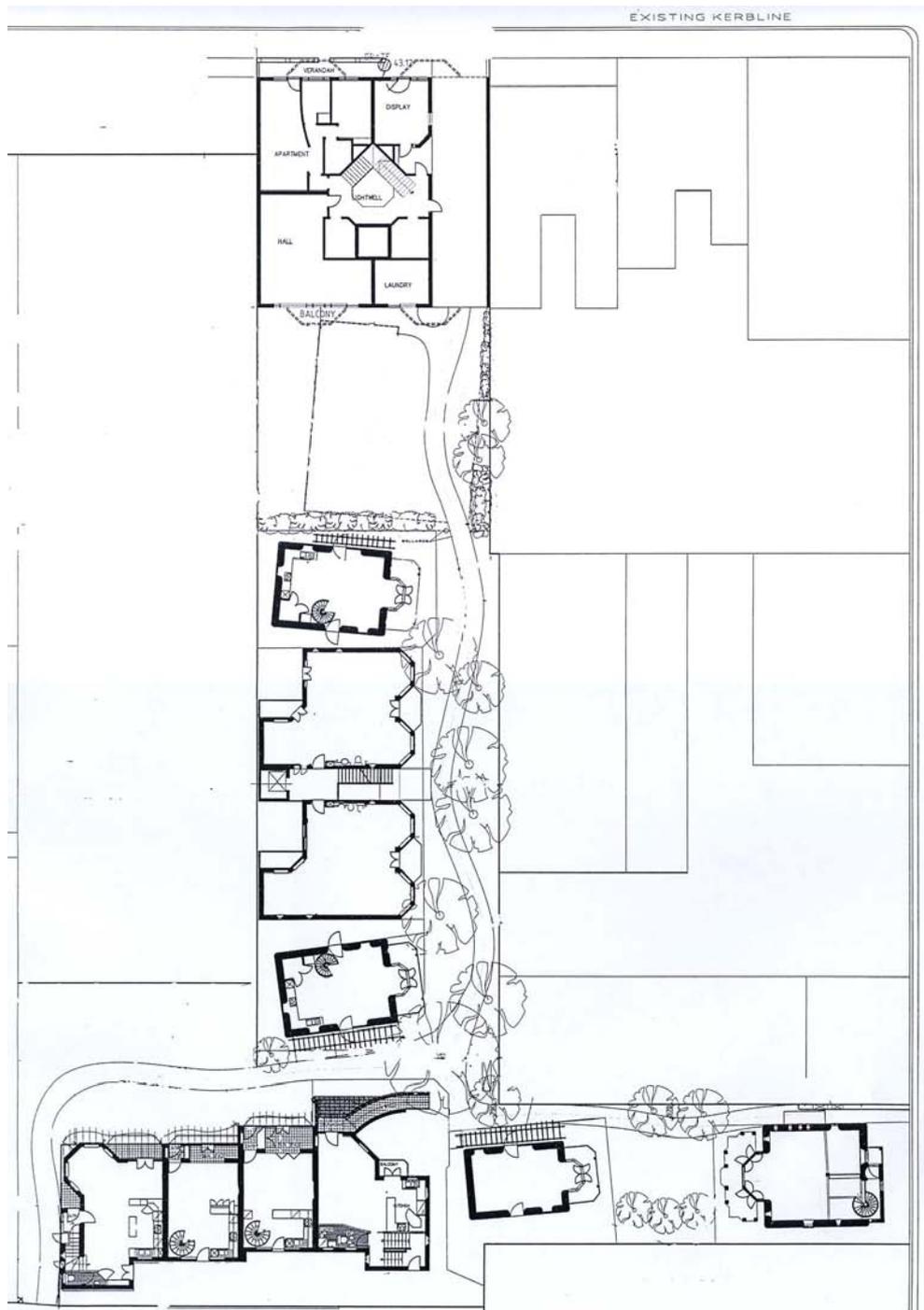


Figure 1. Site Plan of Christie Walk, 2007. Courtesy of Ecopolis Architects.

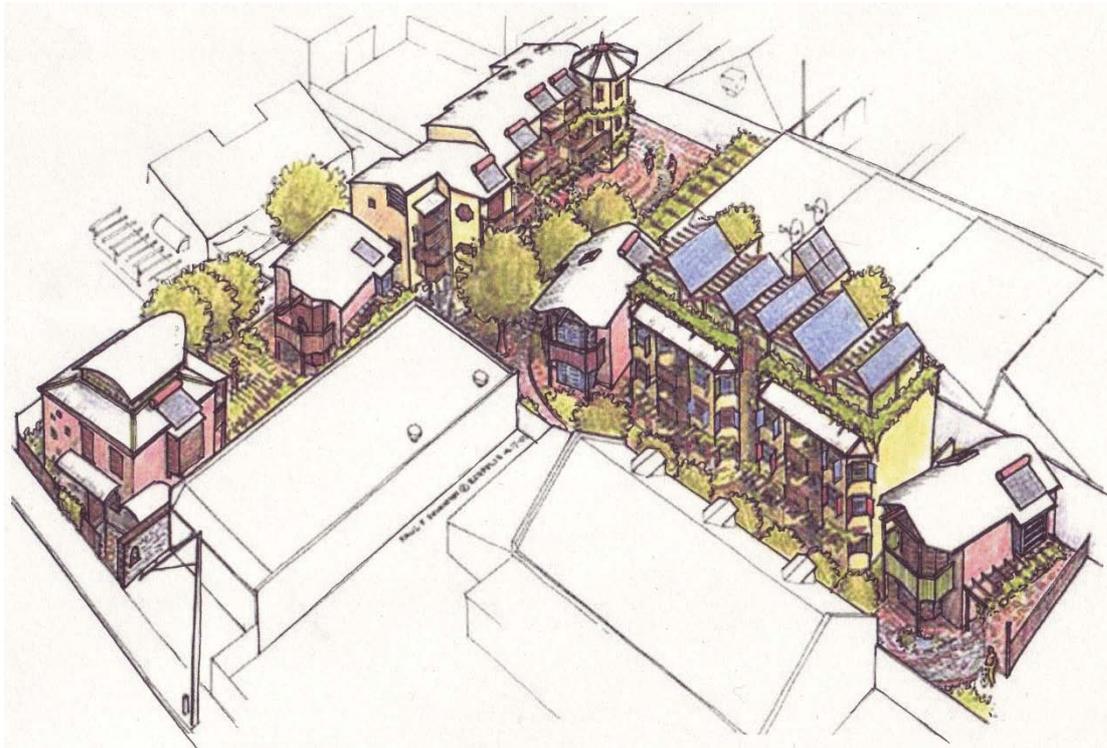


Figure 2. Ecopolis architects, *Elevation of Christie Walk* 2004. Courtesy of Ecopolis Architects. A paved courtyard and a further block of apartments has now been completed at the front of the site (lower right of the image).

The construction priorities, from the beginning, were the low environmental impact, and the social sustainability of the site, rather than those of the tight timelines, contained costs and profit motive of the mainstream building and development sector. These aims are visible in design, materials and building processes. A number of the dwellings are deliberately small in size, minimising the use of materials. Recycled materials were used wherever possible. All materials and finishes used in the interiors were considered for their environmental impact during manufacture and beyond. Hence ‘non-toxic construction and finishes [were] used throughout, and a policy of avoiding formaldehyde and minimising the use of PVC’ was implemented (Downton 2009, p.285). Energy and water conservation measures were built in. A number of the buildings were constructed for long-term survival: the apartment block under the roof garden, for example, has a skin of aerated concrete blocks which are load-bearing and long lasting. The internal apartment walls are not load-bearing and can be moved to create new spaces for low cost, should new owners wish to remodel, making the apartments both long-lasting and flexible. Dwellings and windows are placed in relation to the sun, to reduce energy needs so far as possible, on this oddly-shaped site. The ‘skin’ (that

is, the roofs and walls) is highly insulated. Low wattage light globes are used by 100% of dwellings for most uses and energy- and water-efficient appliances were standard issue. Steeply sloping roofs, provide support for solar hot water systems, and also capture and deliver rainwater to large underground tanks for on-site water conservation (Downton 2009, p.285). The thick, rendered walls of the timber-frame-and-strawbale cottages are pierced by small, double-glazed windows, the curved reveals of which lend a gentle quality of light to the interiors. An almost mediaeval appearance has resulted from these requirements, prompting some visitors to ask for the head hobbit. Architectural form, however, reflects environmental concerns (Downton 2009, p.288). Stylistic quaintness was an outcome, rather than an aim.

Provision has been made for bio- diversity and productivity in the surprisingly extensive gardens. A deep-soil roof garden on top of one block of units provides a welcome shady and breezy green space for barbecues and leisure pursuits. Private gardens and shared spaces are set out along the pathway which meanders along the 'street' of houses. The vegetable patch circled by fruit trees is designated as a shared space, providing food accessible to all. Along the path are small spaces punctuated by benches where people can meet. Trees and creepers provide visual and environmental screens. Deciduous vines on northerly and westerly aspects are planted for energy conservation, reducing the heating of interiors in Adelaide's searing summer and contributing to the circulation of cool air through a system of shutters.

Among the many strategies, which encourage environmentally sustainable practices upon completion, is the provision of a single, large, shared laundry furnished with energy and water-efficient machines, instead of including a laundry in each dwelling. This reduces unnecessary use of space, power, water, and consumption of white- goods. The energy implications of transport are also considered. The site's urban location was chosen for its proximity to public transport. Only eleven car spaces exist on site and there is no through route except footpaths. Provision has been made on site for a storage shed for bicycles.

There is absolutely no doubt about the success of the rigorous energy conservation strategies. These have been documented in two independent reports (Oliphant 2004, and Daniell et al. 2005). UEA, projects, not the least Christie Walk, have also either won or been honourably mentioned in a number of state, national and international inquiries, awards and prizes, including the federal government's Inquiry into Sustainable Cities, 2005, the World Habitat

Award 2005, the Ruataro Hashimoto APFED international planning award and in 2006 two Adelaide Trust awards. (Downton 2009, pp.299 and 564).

Christie Walk as Civil Society

Michael Edwards whose writing on civil society underpins this work, cites a predisposition for voluntary sociality, that is sociality beyond the influence of governments and markets, as the first of his three definitions of civil society (Edwards 2004). The Christie Walk project falls well within this definition, having come out of discussions within a voluntary organization Urban Ecology Australia (UEA) based on its American counterpart (Roseland 1997, p.197). The South Australian organisation was prompted by the Federal-government sponsored Greenhouse 88 conference of 1988. UEA was incorporated in 1991 as a non-profit body, with the aim of circulating information about eco-city ideas (Downton 2009, pp.221-224). From this time onwards, voluntary effort drove the work. Kept at arms length from the market through non-profit structures, the project's civil society standing was never constrained by the drive for profit. Nor was it compromised by the intervention of government. For Christie Walk, unlike many co-operative housing projects in Australia, never relied on substantial government funding to pay for the project. Those which do, despite their very considerable voluntary efforts, tend to fall under the provisions and regulations of public housing (van Reyk 2008). Christie Walk has no such connection. Apart from one federal government grant to fund the photovoltaic cells, its funds originated with the owners of its dwellings, from non-resident supporters of the project and from ethical borrowings (Downton 2009, p.288). Still the project required interaction with government and market institutions.

The purpose of voluntary associations – those causes for which people advocate – are highlighted by Michael Edwards' second definition: civil society as the good society. As Bob Edwards and Michael W. Foley note, in the west, one of the major functions of civil society groups is the establishing of alternative ways of achieving collective goods. Underlying their action is an implicit critique of traditional representative forms of democracy (Edwards & Foley 2003) and a favouring of greater citizen participation. Eco-city projects such as Christie Walk, aim to create environmentally sustainable sites and communities which are socially self-sustaining. In doing so, they build that social capital without which the economic and non-economic enterprises of an active society cannot

engage to their fullest capacity. Essential to this broad commitment to improving sociality and the urban environment has been the installation of participatory processes and non-hierarchical social structures which value the contributions of all. At Christie Walk, these were initially integrated into the decision-making of UEA forums, and continued in later resident bodies, which managed the development phase. These processes also ensured the installation of environmentally responsible solutions in the construction phase. Commitment to civil society as the good society is therefore deeply embedded in the Christie Walk design and practices through the synergy of normative aspirations in two fields: social and environmental sustainability.

Edwards also flagged a third definition for civil society – the public sphere, for without the free circulation of information, civil society cannot function. UEA's early role in disseminating information about the eco-city is proclaimed by its name. This demonstrates how alert Christie Walkers have always been to the importance of communication in the public sphere. UEA runs its own website and blog. Members provide regular tours of the site, advertising these in the local press. These are led by residents and non-resident volunteers trained for the purpose. UEA have produced and offer for sale, *Moving towards Sustainability*, a manual about Christie Walk and the ideals of eco-city development. Demand for regular tours of the site is strong, and is particularly popular with secondary school groups and politicians (Rohde 2008). It is clear that Christie Walk represents, indeed synthesises, all three definitions of civil society, in the manner advocated by Michael Edwards offering a comprehensive picture of the possibilities of civil society.

Social Sustainability

Civil-society associations achieve much of their work via their resources of social capital. Indeed social sustainability requires the generation of social capital. In Robert Putnam's terms this refers to "those features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam 1993). Both "bonding", and "bridging" social capital are important (Woolcock & Narayan 2000; Putnam 2000, Leonard & Onyx 2003). Bonding social capital operates within the community and serves to provide the "social glue" that holds the community together and provides social support for its members. It appears to be characterised by dense, multi-functional ties and strong but localised trust. Indeed Halpern's (2005) multi-layered conceptual map defines

social capital as networks, norms and sanctions and assigns trust a salient, consolidating role in relationships. Five important elements of bonding social capital are: Associational density within the community, Participation in community life, Shared values, Trust and Agency (Onyx & Bullen 2000). Bridging social capital refers to connections beyond the community. The extent to which communities can command their diverse social, professional and information networks to draw upon internal and external expertise, ideas and resources is a crucial feature of regenerative capacity.

Following difficulties in finding a suitable developer for an earlier, large, but ultimately unrealised plan, the Halifax Eco-City Project, UEA became developers, forming Wirranendi Inc., a not-for-profit, registered co-operative. In the absence of a formally employed developer, several committed advocates co-operated to address a wide range of concerns, including those of development (Downton 2009, p.284). They undertook as much of the administration, planning and building works as possible as volunteers. One of the houses and all of the gardens were actually built by supporters, following on-site workshops offered with the support of some local building trades. Following the completion in 2001 of the first house, the Roman Hut (named for its owner), residents successively moved into their dwellings as they were completed (*The Advertiser* Adelaide 21 April 2001, online transcript; Downton 2009, pp.281-286).

Voluntary effort and collective mode of decision-making and action are built into Urban Ecology Australia and are part of the legal structures of community title under which the site is owned and in the co-operative Wirranendi Inc, the entity which developed Christie Walk. They are integral to the design, fabric and processes of building and living at Christie Walk and is visible in the provision of a common meeting room, in the co-operative vegie garden and in spaces in the garden to sit together. Voluntary working bees and social events are part of the life. One author, visiting to undertake interviews for this paper, participated in a working bee, carting paving tiles with others so a large area of paving could be completed. Ongoing projects continue the tradition, for example, the commitment to rubbish recycling and the body corporate's negotiations with Go-Get, the car-share company, to provide low-impact transport for Christie Walk residents and its neighbourhood when other options are not sufficient (Rohde 2008). Joint decision-making occurs within the body corporate, in the policy of inclusion and encouragement to participate in community work, building and

garden maintenance at Christie Walk, and in the frequent social events carried on, often in the meeting-room designed for group events and get-togethers on site. Bonding social capital is evident in their success – approximately 25 households of the 27 attend and participate regularly (Rohde 2008).

Bridging social capital is also present. Many residents have connections with advocacy-based NGOs and local community bodies. These are permitted to book and use the meeting room, so long as the Christie Walk residents do not need it. Also a policy of open access to the site means that neighbours are welcome to the place and not discouraged from cutting through on foot on the way to another place, explicitly countering tendencies to a gated community (Rohde 2008). The contrast is striking between Christie Walk and the isolation of suburbia where many residents become cut off in their homes, grooming their real-estate, and entering and exiting in cars so that they rarely meet their neighbours.

Adjustments have been made by some residents. Some of the terrace-house residents found that their top floors were very hot in Adelaide's searing summer. One has installed air-conditioning. Other residents have decided to install their own washing machines in their residences. Despite these small variations, on the basis of contribution to civil society through environmental rigor and social sustainability that Christie Walk is, by all accounts a very successful development, sustaining its aims through a long implementation period. In a very few cases, residents were unprepared for the differences between Christie Walk and a mainstream development. One household was very critical of the problems with the experimental sewage system and with the long timelines and moved out (*Adelaide Review*, 15 April 2005, Downton 2008). Still, the overwhelming majority of residents remain very content with the place they have created: although saleable, homes change hands very slowly, for few want to leave. And those that do change, do so by word of mouth (Rohde 2008). Despite their success only one other comparable urban eco-city development has been built in Australia: Westwyk in inner-city Melbourne. A second South Australian example, Aldinga, has, like Westwyk, acknowledged Christie Walk as its inspiration, but Aldinga is a more expansive development and certainly not urban, being built outside Adelaide on rural land (Rohde 2008, Downton 2008, p.286). Why, having won international and national acclaim from planning and environmental agencies, is Christie Walk not imitated and replicated more?

Part of the answer must lie in the answer to a subsidiary consideration: why was the process at Christie Walk so lengthy; what made it so difficult? Here we will examine one aspect which may shed light on why this question– the contribution of some major institutions. How have these constrained processes and opportunities at Christie Walk? John Henningham’s definition of institutions includes both large, formally constituted forms and bodies, but also those less formal, but still influential, customs and practices of culture, similar to Elinor Ostrom’s ‘rules-in-use’ – informal institutions which may shape human behaviour. (Henningham 1995, p.3, Ostrom 2003, Chapter 2). The institutions which emerge as significant at Christie Walk include both formal and informal types. We may thus begin to see some of the character of Australian civil society and the ways in which its institutions shape it. Four institutions appear to have been particularly problematic: legal, bureaucratic, financial, and media institutions.

Legal structures

Where the not-for profit UEA worked well, South Australia’s community title legal form and the co-operative entity Wirranendi were not always successful at Christie Walk. Community Title was introduced into Australia in the 1990s. It explicitly encourages group responsibility for all common areas (Community Titles Act, 1996, South Australia, Division 4, Parts 28, 29; Gleeson 2005). UEA members, many of whom became Christie Walk residents had input into its introduction to South Australia and had hopes that it might be better adapted to their needs (Downton 2008).

Residents found, however, that Community Title, does not allow for community ownership in quite the terms that they envisaged. The roof garden located on the small block of flats was always planned as a group facility, owned by all. Community Title only permits its ownership to be held by the owners of the apartments within the block upon which it was sited. A great deal of voluntary time and effort has also been put into resolving the ownership of the photovoltaic cells on the roof of the large apartment building, which were also intended to be a common asset (Downton 2008), contributing to a blow-out in timelines. Some of these issues have never found a satisfactory systemic solution.

Gleeson argues that Community Title emerged in Australia alongside policies of urban consolidation. In one model, quietly encouraged by some local governments hopeful of

gaining cost-free revenue, streets, parks and other infrastructure are not delivered, paid for or maintained by the government for the benefit of all citizens, but built by and initially maintained by the developer, and paid for by the purchasers. Later both the responsibility and costs of maintenance revert to the owners of the dwellings. Residents then find themselves paying both rates and community title levies. Christie Walk being small and including no driveable streets has largely avoided this problem. However, there is also the potential for this form of title to form gated communities, which encourage an isolated, exclusivist attitude, undermining the inclusive public domain, so essential for liberal democratic societies. (Gleeson 2005, pp.3-5; Gleeson 2006, pp.85-6). To avoid this, the Christie Walk community had to formulate an explicit policy to ensure open access. Still the potential for closing access lies dormant within its legal structure. The constitution of the body corporate under the act, states that members must 'encourage the community' but does not spell out what this means. Even the word co-operation is absent from the wording of Community Corporation 20575, or the subsidiary corporations functioning under it.

In short, residents are acutely aware that their legal structures do not ensure the continuation of their aims for social sustainability in the future. Christie Walk remains co-operative in approach, subject, however, to the goodwill of committed residents to continue social sustainability into the future.

Bureaucratic practices

Wirrandendi Inc. had other problems with the legal structure. The accountability mechanisms for co-operatives in South Australia proved largely inappropriate for the Christie Walk development. The cooperative structures in South Australia appeared to the Christie Walk developers to essentially be designed to facilitate the creation of self-managed, state government-funded social housing. When Wirrandendi sought advice from the government authority, which had been set up to oversee and assist cooperatives, they received virtually no useful information or support: Christie Walk simply didn't fit the model of organisation they had been set up for and had become used to servicing. Indeed they would have been better served by a not-for profit company, run co-operatively. (Paul Downton, personal communication September 2008). Barraket investigated the co-operatives of New South Wales in a large study on urban renewal. She cites unpublished ACCORD research showing that negotiation of the registration, auditing and reporting requirements were a significant

barrier for co-operatives. There is a need for more streamlined and accessible accountability systems (2001, pp.75-76).

Most of the New South Wales co-operative communities similarly struggle with the culture of bodies which administer their accountability for the funds they receive. Housing co-operatives are to a great extent funded and/or administered by state government departments of public housing and by charitable, often church-based, organizations. All such institutions, like the welfare system, have long been understood in Australia as supporters of the poorest and most vulnerable people. Henningham reminds us that the Australian welfare system is based on the old charitable approach to citizen need, distinguishing between the worthy and the unworthy poor. Ironically, instead of increasing equality, this requirement to distinguish between categories of people creates hierarchies and an authoritarian approach to management.

Many housing co-operatives have long been financed and therefore administered by Departments of Public Housing (Lyons 2001, p.87). They have therefore been subjected to the authoritarian welfare structures and practices that accompany it. Far from flowering into a wide-ranging and vibrant social sector, which could encompass a community such as Christie Walk, co-operatives now appear mostly to house only the vulnerable of the community albeit those who want to run their own lives co-operatively so far as possible. Not only was the legal instrument unsuitable but the 'welfare' culture within the bureaucracy was inappropriate. Some governments, such as the Victorian State Government, have realised that this is a discouraging model which suffocates the growth of social capital. The resourcing of co-operatives needs to be situated more at arms' length from government and bureaucracies. Following this long history of 'welfare' thinking, a Whole of Government approach to change will be necessary to embed new attitudes at all levels (Barraket 2001, pp.75). The legal instruments for title and the bureaucratic guidelines and approaches to co-operatives, appear to have been drafted for the initial circumstances in which they emerged. A great deal more awareness of practices outside Australia is needed to achieve greater flexibility in drafting and in bureaucratic practice.

Alternative legal models of co-operative ownership and development do exist elsewhere. In one European model, prospective residents form a not-for-profit company and vest the

ownership of the site and the buildings in that entity. Under this legal structure, residents own the real estate through their shareholding in the company, which gives them the exclusive right to a guaranteed lifetime incumbency of their dwelling. A shareholding can be sold intact, complete with its rights to incumbency. The Company has responsibility for exterior maintenance of the exterior of buildings, open space and for major aspects of interior maintenance and repair (Mårtensson 2008 p.5). Building and maintenance issues and disputes can only be addressed through the community's company, enhancing the standing of communal processes.

Finance

Despite the faith of Australian governments in markets, the failure of the latter institution in housing leaves many people to the mercy of the rental market, with others losing, during crises such as the current subprime-induced downturn, homes and savings they have worked hard to acquire. It is clear that government intervention is inevitable. Housing groups were recently (September 2008) in Canberra to lobby the federal government for increased housing stocks of affordable housing. Systematic approaches are surely preferable to the cyclical crises of the free market.

Finance can be difficult for projects such as Christie Walk, be they considered as a co-operative housing site or an environmentally sustainable project. Barraket concludes that traditional financial institutions are wary of co-operative ventures, believing them to be risky. She argues that co-operatives are not always capable of harnessing local sources of finance. Nor do they tend to have well-developed networks with external public and private sources (Barraket 2001, pp.76-77). Direct government finance is only available for the needy. This is understandable, but could be extended by tax instruments. In America, where the involvement of the private sector has been encouraged in non-profit housing since the 1970s, decisions to discontinue large scale public housing, the introduction of, for example, tax credits on land tax for cohousing developments in the 1980s have resulted in an exponential rise in the numbers of cohousing developments (Steven Rathgeb Smith, CCS presentation 19 Sept 2008; Dreir & Hulchanski 1993, p.64). Canada similarly withdrew from large scale public housing in the 1970s. In addressing the nation's social housing needs, its most innovative approach was a non-equity co-operative housing sector in which residents of a variety of small and large co-operatives worked with community-based resource groups to

manage their housing. The aim was to help develop communities, not just to build large-scale housing projects (Dreir & Hulchanski 1993, pp.55-56).

Community title in Australia, where it addresses issues of communally owned areas, still prioritises individual home ownership. Hence the corporate body of such developments, including Christie Walk, is largely restricted to addressing issues concerned with the Christie Walk site itself. Issues beyond Christie Walk, which nevertheless affect it, such as the possibility of forming a wider collective to lobby for cohousing, have not been explored. In the European model, by contrast, the company, once ongoing costs are met, can use any accumulated surpluses in the interests of their co-operative communities. One use of surpluses has been the networking of co-operatives to fund and administer an overarching organization to look after the interests of non-profit housing co-operatives. Through forming a co-operative of co-operatives, the Swedish HSB Riksförbund (the National Federation of Tenants Savings and Building Societies) housing co-operatives have over time become very prolific developers of new housing in that nation, producing both co-operative and mainstream developments, committed to high standards in design and construction (Mårtensson 2008, p.6). In the recession of the 1990s, the European co-operative movement represented by HSB Riksförbund, mentioned above, lost no houses. Representing the not-for-profit companies which own the co-operative housing developments it approached the banks and arranged a write-off of debt by some 20-30%. All retained their homes (Mårtensson 2008, p.5). Clearly a range of systematic approaches to financing co-operatives are in place elsewhere.

Christie Walk was built on a not-for profit basis and was financed individually by the residents themselves, by some generous philanthropic contributions and by loans from ethical investment bodies, including the Bendigo Community Bank and the Community Aid Abroad Ethical Investment Fund. The amounts were unfortunately not large enough to finance the full project from the outset, so financing happened piecemeal, contributing to the slowing of the project and to increasing costs. Christie Walkers also hoped to reduce the costs of construction through their voluntary efforts. The extended deadlines made it difficult to estimate how effective voluntary work was in actually doing so. There was, also, an inherent conflict between the community/environmental goals of the project protagonists which requires considered, potentially time-consuming, reflective decision-making and the

pragmatics of needing to work almost entirely within the mainstream framework of a development process that adds costs to even the slightest delay (Downton 2009, p.283). There were internal contradictions at the personal and collective level, as members of the co-operative wanted to develop the project, but did not want to be 'developers'. An earlier Halifax Eco-City plan foundered at an advanced stage due to the lack of developer preparedness to properly integrate community and ecological programs in the development process (Rohde 2008).

There is no doubt that environmentally responsible construction increases the cost of building developments. It is often argued that this cost is recouped over time from savings in water and energy costs, but good studies on this have not yet been published (Randolf, Kam and Graham 2007, p.210). With increased understanding of climate change, sustainable development has attracted the attention of federal and state governments over the past two decades. Christie Walk received a grant from the federal government for its photovoltaic cells (Downton 2009, pp.285 and 289). Sustainable building codes such as BASIX in New South Wales have been formulated. However, 'financing mechanisms for the provision of low interest green-home loans ... to improve environmental performance [would effectively target] additional up-front costs and [increase] affordability for home buyers', especially for low income families (Randolf, Kam & Graham, 2007, pp.207 and 210-211). Sustainable housing is at the moment only available to middle class aspirants and the funding system remains piecemeal. For this to expand governments will need to show leadership and not allow developers with an interest in a present-centred approach to set the agenda.

In short, government policies which cannot address even a modified universalist approach to housing-needs has stymied innovation in the field of co-operatives for a long time. Nor have those offering private sources of funding been keen to widen their purview. In all cases, the narrow circumstances in which the legislation and practices were initially set up have restricted widening of its use and led to problems, most evident in the extensive blow-out of timelines of the Christie Walk project.

Mass Media

Given the legendary love affair of Australian citizens with real estate and development and also their reputation for taking up new technologies, one would logically expect great interest

in Christie Walk from the mass media. For after all, as ‘the most important source of information, entertainment and education, the media are central to our capacity to define ourselves as citizens’ (Schultz 1994, p.16). We have already noted that Michael Edwards argues that the circulation of information is a basic characteristic, even definition of civil society. Investigations into Christie Walk’s appearance in Australia’s mass media show the constraints which many new topics face in sparking media interest.

The media, both traditional and new have been extensively analysed by academics. Mark Wheeler’s political history of the British media documents how from the emergence of newspapers, press freedom was contested, but from the nineteenth century the drive for profits also gained a central place (1997, pp.52-53). In Australia in the twenty- first century, as elsewhere, tension still remains between the social and economic functions of the media. Indeed nowadays, the press is described as conforming to the ‘mixed business model’ (Simons 2007, Chapter 7), and is understood to be located in the deeper institutional structure of the manufacturing-marketing-media complex (Cunningham & Turner 1997, p.267). The ability of all content to remain unaffected by economic considerations is severely constrained, be the article or program overtly political or merely unsuited to the preferences of the advertiser (Schultz 1994, pp.29-30; Winter 2007, pp.19-20). New media, though subject to less constraint has its own biases (Lister et al. 2003, Chapter 3).

Digital research was conducted in early 2009 into a variety of traditional Australian media sources and also new media, identifying circulation of articles and programs, in print, radio and television, which mentioned the Adelaide housing site from 2000 to 2008, using the key search phrase “Christie Walk”. The records of operations of many media organizations are made available on the world wide web. Broad, internet searches using the Google search engine were also undertaken.

Searches into newsprint sources were carried out through NewsBank Database which gives access to the major newspapers of every state except Western Australia. These were supplemented with searches of the websites of individual media organizations both in that state and elsewhere. Forty newsprint articles engaging with Christie Walk between 2000 and 2008 was captured by this method. (Commercial radio and television do not consistently offer their archives for searching or do not archive their content in digitally searchable form,

so consistent and exhaustive research into these is not possible. It is possible however to search the content of print media and the national public television and radio programs of the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission)). Thirty of these articles appeared in South Australian newspapers, *The Advertiser* (12) being the most prolific. In addition, the *Adelaide Review*, a monthly newspaper circulating in Adelaide coffee shops has also published two substantial articles and a brief paragraph on Christie Walk since 2004, but its circulation is limited. New South Wales and Victoria together published nine, only one of which was substantial. Tasmania published just one minor mention and the other states and territories none. Fifteen of the total addressed Christie Walk alone, and a further sixteen focussed on sustainability.

This is a remarkably small number of articles about a project of national and international significance, especially published in the traditional media which still claim to have a public interest *raison d'être*. As Simons notes, however, the media tends to maintain the status quo. At best 'it may be a force for reform and often it is not even that' (Simons 2007 p. 50). Christie Walk by its not-for-profit ideals and communal modes of planning and organization, encourages new economic and social frameworks in place of the exclusively individualist and capitalist approaches favoured under our current version of the liberal democratic system (Crabtree 2005, pp. 333 and 347-348). The commitment at Christie Walk to the use of environmentally sustainable building materials and construction methods prioritise thoughtful, responsible choice, in place of the market- and price- driven choices encouraged by the present system. Media revenue, however, comes from current businesses/ advertisers, not from future ideas.

The Australian newspaper, which represents the national print arena is illustrative of the specificity of advertiser's interests. This paper made minor mention of Christie Walk in two articles only. Both articles highlighted simple, real-estate agent-generated 'star' systems for rating some aspects of eco-efficiency in properties on the market, briefly citing Christie Walk's rating in their system. *The Australian's* failure to report Christie Walk's achievements in its own right, and the specific focus of both articles suggests the commercial media's interests in the existing system of real estate. Moreover neither of the star systems published in *The Australian* included a category for awarding 'stars' for transport sustainability, which Christie Walk addresses. The sale of motor-cars has long been another revenue raiser for commercial print media, including their new, online sites. It appears that pressure is brought

to bear on media by big companies who have indeed withdrawn big accounts after adverse reporting of their activities, and have also pressed for and gained control over content. Indeed real estate and motor vehicle companies are documented culprits internationally (Winter 2007, pp.19-31). Winter has further criticised the antipathy that the commercial media exhibits towards citizens who support environmentally responsible practices and policies. When green issues are discussed in the press, supporters are regularly referred to in pejorative terms by the press as ‘Militants, eco-zealots, ideologues’, ‘ratbags’ and ‘activists’, engendering mistrust in their opinions, actions and judgment (2007, pp.60-62).

This track record of bias, omissions and denigration shows the huge barriers which have to be overcome in achieving circulation of information through the mainstream media. This is important because a great many citizens rely on the public-interest role of the mainstream media for news of new technologies and new issues. For decades an unconscionable silence was maintained by the mainstream news media on the issue of global warming. The silence was broken only when a new circulation path, the cinema, was co-opted to broadcast Al Gore’s famous 2007 documentary, ‘An Inconvenient Truth’, a mode of circulation not controlled by advertising and their allies, the media moguls of radio, television and print media. This demonstrates how tightly the commercial media were and are controlled by those wanting current, environmentally-destructive business interests to remain dominant.

The national significance of Christie Walk has not, however, been entirely ignored. ABC radio and television have broadcast a small but substantial oeuvre on Christie Walk. Since 2004, four of ABC’s specialist weekly programs have addressed Christie Walk in substantial programs. Radio National’s *Science Show* concentrated on Christie Walk in a segment on technical innovation on 28 August 2004. ABC TV’s weekly round-up of state news, *Stateline*, led a full segment about Christie Walk with the announcement of the visit of the UN-backed Asia-pacific Forum for Environment and Development to Christie Walk on 28 July 2006, which was to result in a second place for Christie Walk in this international competition. ABC TV’s *Catalyst* featured architect Paul Downton and Christie Walk, among others, in a sustainability program on sustainability entitled ‘People Power’ on 24 May 2007. *By Design* is a radio program addressing issues of architecture and innovation. Its presenter, Alan Saunders, took a tour of Christie Walk on 20 October 2007 and included a full interview with architect Paul Downton. Given the weekly scheduling and the more substantial nature of

the programs, this is a better track record. Clearly ABC commentators in science, design and local news have recognised Christie Walk as a worthy subject for national broadcasting.

Searches using new media, specifically the internet, showed coverage surpassing that in the traditional media. Google searches, using the key phrase 'Christie Walk' garnered 268 hits, very few of which duplicated the above. These were overwhelmingly derived from blogs, specialist sites or articles addressing environmental sustainability, though some twenty-two dealt with cohousing/social sustainability. Another group of sites engages with architectural and design issues, some offering technical manuals on sustainability for builders and homeowners. Academic articles and conference papers from several universities accounted for some fifty hits. It is clear that there is far greater interest in Christie Walk within civil society than the level of interest of traditional media would imply. It is noteworthy that the interest largely comes from an educated audience - one already alert to the particular issues of sustainability. Here, the class bias of new media is evident. The cost of its infrastructure limits it to those educated and wealthy households which can afford it (Lister et al. 2003, pp.199-200).

The presence of blogs and postings of educational organizations and advocacy groups for environmental sustainability within this cohort demonstrates that educated citizens are greatly concerned and are drawing on both its social capital and new circulation routes for information, to more widely disseminate solutions to urgent environmental and social problems. It is clear that civil society is far more interested in environmentally sustainable issues and solutions than the number of published mentions of Christie Walk from traditional media sources implies.

Still 248 is not a vast number of hits, given the urgency of need for action on climate change and the importance of Christie Walk as Australia's first and only urban (as opposed to suburban or rural) eco-city development, and one which is internationally recognised. South Australians, however, with the advantage of greater circulation of information about the development in their local mainstream media clearly recognised the value of urban eco-city developments. In 2007, Dr Paul Downton was voted a finalist, one of five, in South Australia's process for choosing a candidate for Australian of the Year (<http://www.australianoftheyear.org.au/pages/page356.asp>). Though another was chosen, it is a measure of the understanding of South Australians of the national significance of Christie

Walk and their knowledge of the role of its architect as a critical catalyst of the project, that Paul Downton was voted a finalist by the residents of that state.

The media's role as a propaganda arm of current industries has played a significant part in the recent failure of world financial and economic systems, which were prompted by a real-estate financing imbalance - the sub-prime mortgage crisis. Large, motor manufacturers have also been prominent among those companies and sectors which over-reached themselves, and failed. The maintenance of the social/ public interest of the media is essential if new ways of addressing the world's problems, such as ecological and social sustainability, are to be understood and engaged with by governments and populations. The paltry coverage of the successes of Christie Walk by Australian mainstream media amply demonstrates their suppression of discussion of new ideas and their focus on their own business as usual. This unhealthy situation has deprived big companies of the robust debate which could work to restrain their drive for power and control. For the drive to control exhibited by Australia's media organizations prevents information about new and better methods of being in the world from circulating and being acted upon, certainly in the arena of business practice, but also in other arenas such as environmental and social sustainability.

It is clear that the wider circulation of information about sustainability remains seriously constrained. The resistance to change and the provincial mindset of Australia's media minimise the circulation of new ideas, which restricts discussions and therefore the numbers of followers, supporters, lobbyists of government for policy change and the number of potential benefactors. A mass media sector which meets its public interest obligations is an essential part of civil society and a democratic society.

Concluding remarks

The explanation of why Christie Walk has not been replicated more and why the process was so difficult, must be complex and partly resides in the exponential rise in the cost of land. Another factor must be the time-frame: from 'go to whoa' the processes, by which the desire of a group of Adelaide residents to build and live in a socially and environmentally sustainable urban place, have taken the best part of eight years to achieve. Burnout has now emerged as an issue (Downton 2008). The role of institutions in the blow-out of timelines must be questioned.

The Christie Walk community, a network which has a considerable history of pride in its civil society standing, eschewing the mainstream influences of government control and market blandishments, succeeded over the period 1999-2007 in achieving a new type of housing development which was socially and environmentally sustainable during construction. It continues to address, with the increasing urgency of global warming, environmental and social sustainability in everyday life.

Further, Christie Walk and other civil society groups have addressed these issues through innovative methods – by utilising their local social capital networks and norms of co-operation and reciprocity. This success has been achieved *despite* the input of government institutions. Market-based institutions, such as the banks have been similarly inactive. The mainstream media have gone further, ignoring their public-interest duties in circulating news of innovative solutions in favour of support for market-based vested interests. Though at the moment no substitute for a truly free press, the internet at least offers a number of avenues for the spread of information.

It is clear that civil society groups, such as the Christie Walk community, can make a huge contribution for the public good, at times with little drain on the public purse. However all development requires interaction with major institutions. This is unavoidable and indeed citizens should be able to expect co-operation when engaged in such public-interest projects. It does Australia no credit at all that its government institutions, far from supporting the work of civil society bodies, are so inflexible as to be a considerable drag on their ability to implement innovative, indeed essential, social and environmental ideas. Similarly, that the public media, which promote the public interest function of the public sphere when it suits them, can so slow the spread of much-needed new ideas. The aspirations and commitment of the Christie Walk community offer a substantial template for civil society organizations attempting to implement new ideas, especially in the field of social and environmental sustainability. However the processes of construction of Christie Walk, marred as they were by inflexible practices and vested institutional interests, have not proved to be a model suitable for copying at all. In a time of great crisis concerning global warming, Australia's major institutions, governmental (political, legal and bureaucratic) and private (banking and media) need to re-commit to their public interest functions and, instead of being the enemy of

innovation, support the implementation of new and relevant ideas for the public good into the future.

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