

A TRICKLE UP EFFECT: Towards Affordable and Sustainable Housing

Col James,
Director, Ian Buchan Fell Housing Research Centre,
University of Sydney

An underlying supposition behind this paper is that by a concentration of effort towards improving housing conditions for the homeless, the transitory and the poorest members of our society, that a knock-on effect could improve their lot and that of others suffering housing stress. A gain in self-reliance becomes a stake in furthering the aspirations of home and nurturing a social mix.

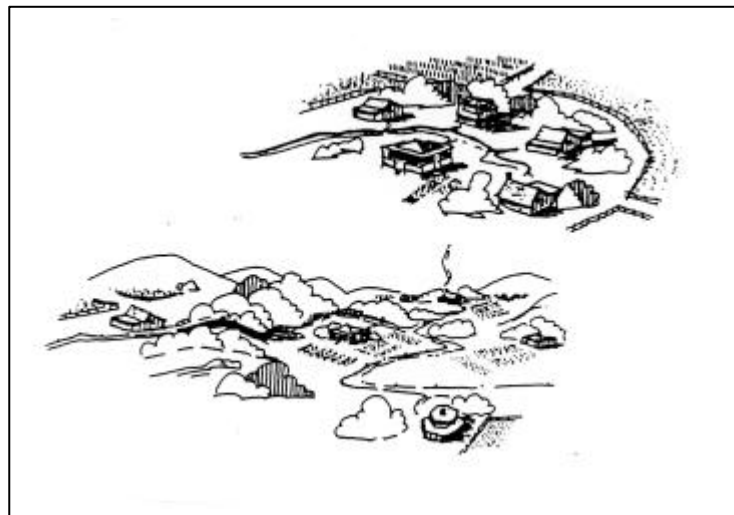
A RURAL REVOLUTION

Significant changes took place in rural NSW following the staging of the National Union of Students sponsored Aquarius Festival at Nimbin, near Lismore in the spring of 1973. Apart from a celebration of things possible from an incoming Whitlam government, this was intended as and became a serious decentralization gambit for young urban Australians seeking a better lifestyle and a sustainable future. The ‘After-Nimbin-What?’ enthusiasm began settling marginal dairy lands, deserted because of the loss of state milk quotas, into small intentional communities bent on repairing the bush and re-inventing a subsistence lifestyle. Despite the rural establishment’s predictions of a short term fad, this back-to-the-bush movement flourished as multiple occupancies complete with dirt-cheap expanded hand-built houses, organic gardens, and craft industries, flourished in northeastern NSW, coastal regions, the Tablelands, the Blue Mountains, fringe Newcastle and Sydney and south to the Bega Valley. Peter Hamilton of the Pan Com (NCOSS) estimates that of the official 1980 figure of seven thousand households in NSW, most have settled and remained in sustainable settlements in diverse socially mixed communities. Typical material and services costs per household at Bodhi Farm, for example, were less than \$2,000/dwelling.

Types of Housing on Multiple Occupancy Properties

Housing arrangements on multiple occupancy properties may vary from dispersed single family dwellings to clusters of expanded houses where groups of buildings function as a dwelling house, with shared facilities such as a kitchen and bathroom.

“Clustered” and “dispersed” settlements are two forms of development.



URBAN IMPACT

The concepts of taking advantage of under-utilized local resources, with self- and communal help principles, had little impact on consumer driven and a competitive urban society, which abandoned the poor and dispossessed. The safety nets were left to Shelter and the charities to provide meagre and often inappropriate housing which only helped to marginalise and institutionalise those benefits provided by Government resources.

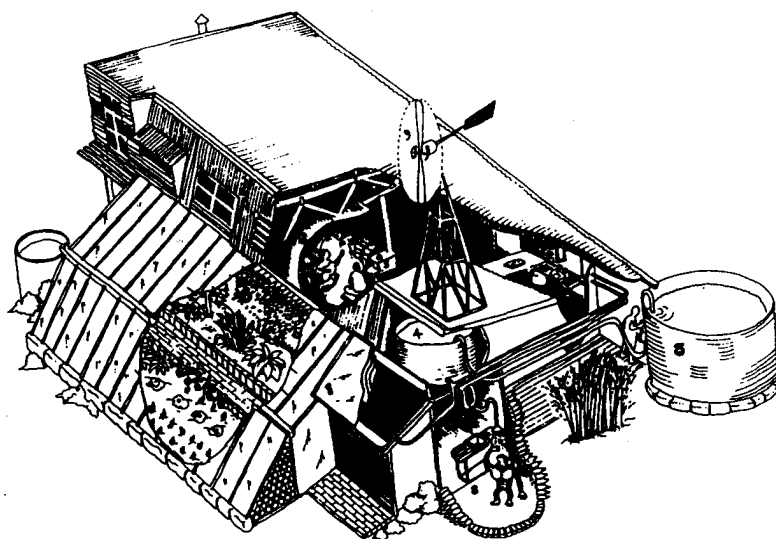
The author's own experience in recycling an abandoned warehouse for an urban commune near this University and the bitter struggle with South Sydney Council in 1974-1978 by the Dempsey Family to house 10 (unrelated) persons in housing at a total cost including land, building and legal fees at \$6000/person, managed to create a legal precedent for up to 10 unrelated persons being classified as a single-family occupancy.

On the basis of this model, the NSW Department of Planning commissioned the SURPLUS project which had access to all NSW Government surplus property and provided data for four feasibility studies, two of which were implemented for social housing.

The Department of Housing also had a brief flirtation with group homes, but the anonymous waiting list of unconnected persons proved to be its downfall.

The Autonomous House at the nearby University of Sydney campus housed 4-6 students for 4 years at a capital cost of \$800 total, but with a huge effort in labour to scavenge, recycle and build a no-running cost household. The four years of exposure with fairs and school visits did demonstrate the technological impact of solar and wind power, passive solar design, rainwater collection, productive gardens and recycling waste. Some of these items are becoming commonplace but as yet have had no serious impact on affordability.

Even Michael Mobb's sustainable house which is having a significant impact on Councils in particular has not produced **affordable** outcomes yet.



Autonomous House, Sydney University

BROADWAY SQUATS

During the Olympic Games 2000, the Sydney Housing Action Collective (SHAC) publicised its squatting presence at Broadway near the busiest intersection with City Road, highlighting that the growing Sydney housing market was having a devastating impact on young unemployed youth remaining in Sydney. (The Dempsey Family Warehouse, not far away, was now valued at \$750,000, an increase of nearly 2000% over 26 years.)

The Broadway Squats, with four households of a collective of 26 young artists, musicians, students, and activists, were occupying old shop/houses that were being made habitable by each household group using self-help activities with discarded materials to contrive basic, but comfortable quarters. The only costs incurred were consultant fees to meet Council requirements as a legitimate, incorporated and insured tenant/caretaker. The notion of borrowing (leasing at nil cost) vacant property awaiting redevelopment and acting as caretakers was developed here. An incorporation vehicle called Empty Spaces Temporary Places (ESTP) and a standard lease but with specific recitals outlining the circumstances for vacating property were useful precedents when SHAC departed and Australand (the developer) commenced demolition for redevelopment with upmarket high-rise apartments at the very extreme opposite of the squatting initiative.

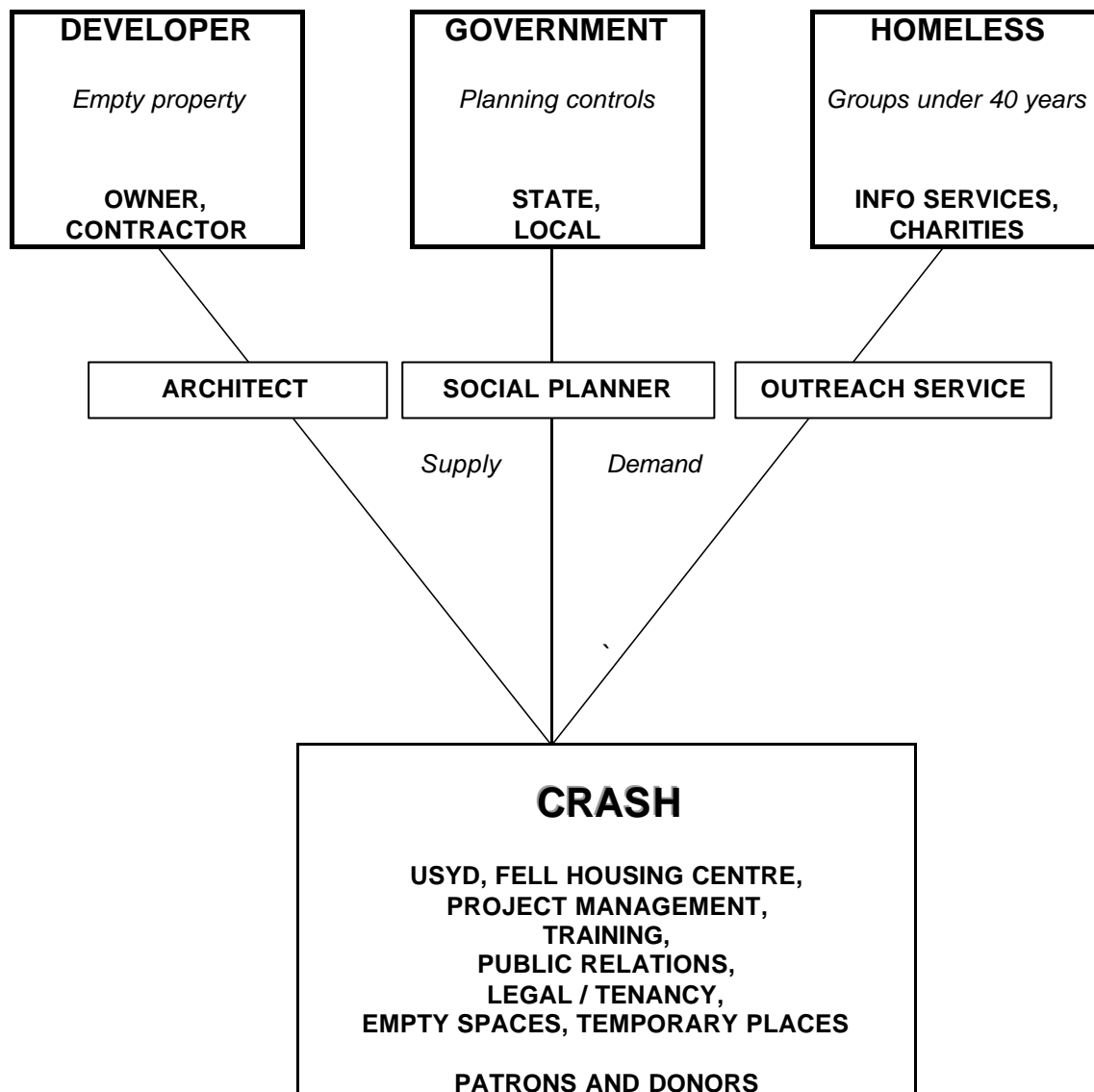
I suspect that the squatters wherever they may be in another vacant property will be enjoying life more than the prospective speculators.

CRASH (and future prospect for no-cost housing)

With continuing contact with ESTP and the UTS Law and Legal Research Centre, the Fell Housing Research Centre developed a combined model from an established group in London, called CRASH (Construction Industry Relief and Assistance for Single Homeless) who have been accommodating homeless persons in vacant property for ten years. With access to 1000 volunteers throughout the UK, CRASH shelters 35,000 persons on average per night in collaboration with support services.

CRASH (Sydney) was launched last month by the Institute of Architects whose members are often employed by property owners to prepare development applications for their sites. The social planner in Local Government will be briefed to identify property in good locations for potential short term caretaking. The Council can negotiate with the owner's architect to negotiate benefits for the owner in meeting the short term needs of homeless persons in the vicinity. As a HIA spokesperson said, "If it's a win for the developer and the homeless we'll support the CRASH idea."

CRASH intends to develop three urban pilot projects before next winter to establish good credentials for the scheme before promoting the idea in a broader context.



Outline of CRASH model

CONCLUSION

The parallels between what the “new settlers”, (as they prefer) were doing in a rural housing setting in 1975 and what a similar generation of urban activists were doing in an urban housing setting in 2000 are remarkable. Both took over a disused resource, and utilizing other available (no cost) materials made homes according to their needs. Both were no or low cost housing solutions which met the current triple bottom line standards to a degree which couldn’t be matched today in mainstream. The importance of this bottom line is that with due encouragement the urban model could also house the thousands of episodic homeless in cities and big towns. With the caretakers training program as a CRASH requirement, potential jobs would eventually become a service industry to connect with other key workers in cities. This in turn develops social mix relationships and benefits both the rich and the poor.

PROPOSITIONS

In the context of the rapidly declining availability of any affordable housing in places well-served with employment opportunities, education and other concentrated resources, the following propositions are submitted for consideration.

1. That a register of vacant property in metropolitan centres is created and maintained for access by key stakeholders, to include the 108,300 vacant dwellings in Sydney Statistical Division identified by the 2001 Census, shop top housing and vacant property owned by Commonwealth, State and Local Government. (This proposal was endorsed by the Homelessness Summit convened by the NSW Legislative Council in 2001)

- Create register of vacant buildings.
- Create special leases for vacant buildings for temporary accommodation.
- Create register of Community Housing Co-ops that can sign such leases.
- Create 'caretaker' leases providing 'temporary licenses to occupy' or 'restricted life' cooperative ventures.
- Encourage governments to consider using vacant public buildings for accommodation for the homeless.
- State Government assist Councils to develop vacant building strategies through a Housing Investment Program funded by the Public Housing Fund.
- State Government support the development of a Vacant Buildings Agency as a joint venture with Councils and non-government organisations to develop strategies including Best Value performance indicators that require agencies and Councils to publish information on the number of vacant buildings re-used.
- State Government review legislation to permit temporary re-zonings to allow the residential use of buildings where the existing zoning would otherwise prevent such use.
- State Government determine a minimum safe standard for this style of accommodation.

**USE OF VACANT BUILDINGS:
Recommendations from NSW Homelessness Summit, May 2001**

Source: Inner Voice, Issue 92, Spring 2001, p. 9

2. That metropolitan Councils in key areas of need for affordable housing prepare appropriate LEPs to identify areas of concentration of rough sleepers and congregation places for homeless persons together with support services of meals, medications, and accessible solutions to alert owners of vacant property to the range of benefits available for helping to relieve homelessness.
3. That the recent successful campaign in London to identify the necessity to retain key workers in urban areas to provide essential services such as nursing, paramedics, teachers, police, council workers, and say caretakers, is used to support the inclusion of affordable housing in new developments. A component of 50% was promoted for the London Plan (2016) in a total need for 400,000 new housing units. In response the Blair Government doubled the current housing budget.

The Empty Homes Agency London Week of Action revealed the anger Londoners feel about the obscene waste of homes at a time of acute housing need.

With 105,000 homes empty at 1 April 2000 in the Capital and 43,000 households in temporary accommodation (a record number), they have every right to be angry. During the week, held in October with the support of the Big Issue and BBC London, we received a flood of calls from the public, identifying 1,500 empty homes and buildings.

Empty hospitals, supermarkets, barracks, hotels, a leisure centre and a swimming pool were reported as well as many houses and flats standing idle. Dozens of similar calls are received every day on the London Hotline. The calls are passed onto local authorities who, in many cases, will produce schemes to bring the empties into use.

EHA have encouraged London local

authorities to take the problem seriously. In 1997, when EHA Senior Executive Erin Buchanan took over responsibility for the Capital, only 12 boroughs had appointed EPOs.

By last year the number had more than doubled to 25. They meet regularly in an EHA-organised Forum, which acts as a clearing-house of good ideas and practice, lobbies for changes to policy and legislation and provides training. Some of those boroughs yet to appoint officers send representatives.

During the year, the Agency published a good practice guide, *Tackling London's Empties*, which draws on examples from 20 authorities.

Mayor of London Ken Livingstone has added his support to our work, promising to co-operate with the boroughs and the EHA to reclaim a target of 100,000 empty homes.

Extract from *Empty Homes Agency, Annual Report, 2001*

4. Introduce in the NSW Parliament a green paper on Homelessness as a prelude to a Homelessness Act which promotes the rights of homeless persons to adequate shelter and to policies of social inclusion in our urban societies.