



PERSONAL ECOLOGY

CAROLINE PIDCOCK

Caroline Pidcock has been at the forefront of the green architecture movement since the early 90s, at times applauding and groaning simultaneously, she has witnessed the evolution of sustainable building practices through triumphs and disaster.

Words by Jill Fraser

Photograph by Tyler Smith

The fact that there is still debate about the affordability of building and renovating sustainably is a huge concern for Caroline. 'The question of affordability is usually the consequence of a lack of knowledge and/or skewed priorities,' she remarks.

'If you want to take this issue seriously, you have to be prepared to shift your priorities regarding where your dollars are going. Recently I listened to someone argue that they can't afford to double glaze or insulate properly yet they insist on having very expensive kitchen appliances.

People need to be educated in order to appreciate the value of choosing the sometimes more expensive option for the sake of sustainability. It's like buying organic food. People may not see the value of it until they become sick from the chemicals in conventional produce.'

Pidcock, former NSW President of The Royal Australian Institute of Architects and former President of the Australian Sustainable Built Environment Council, stresses that ecologically sound architecture does not automatically translate into additional cost.

Pidcock maintains that it's about engaging intelligent design such as passive solar principles, and points to several ways to incorporate green architecture economically.

Chief among these is understanding how to site a building to be more in tune with the climate - naturally warm in winter and cool in summer. In basic terms, this means excluding the sun during summer and accommodating it in winter.

'The biggest difference between a Five Star and a Six Star house is good design,' she declares.

'It's about not merely plonking any dumb box on any site facing in any direction. It's about understanding where the sun is, where the breezes come from and then designing accordingly.

'There are a whole lot of design decisions that cost nothing.'

Pidcock refers to her career path as an indirect journey in which incidental sidings have frequently given rise to a new direction and thrown light on her limitations and the boundaries of her comfort zone. While architecture was a logical way of combining her interests in maths, science, art and psychology, her discovery of green architecture happened accidentally.

In 1992, prior to establishing her

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own practice, she embarked on a small business course and when writing up a business plan, she was confronted with a question about her unique selling point.

'It was a fundamental question that really made me contemplate my style and priorities.'

After several months of pondering she stumbled upon a book entitled *Green Architecture* by Robert and Brenda Vale.

'I opened it and knew immediately that this was my future,' she says.

'I realised how architecture could connect people to the environment and that morally and ethically this was the way ahead.'

The next day an advertisement for a lecturer in architecture at the University of Newcastle caught her eye. She got the job,

negotiated a deal to include Environmental Design in the curriculum and shifted herself and her business to Newcastle.

Now back in Sydney in a gloriously old building in William Street, East Sydney, *Pidcock - Architecture + Sustainability* (recently renamed symbolising Pidcock's opinion that architecture is expanding beyond the existing model) adopts a holistic perspective in which the wellbeing of individuals, society and the greater environment represent integral characteristics of a well-resolved building.

Her vision considers the community in which buildings are placed and includes attention to transport and locally grown food - three permaculture devotees on staff will soon offer guidance to clients.

'No one is an isolated little island,' she declares. 'We have to start realising that we're part of a big system, which is currently unsustainable.'

Pidcock's belief in the notion that the system is a collection of individuals, requiring each person to contribute to the collective whole is reflected in the broad range of positions she has held, and continues to hold.

She is Industry Representative on the Australian Building Codes Board, a Member of the Bicycle NSW Board and an ambassador for the Al Gore Climate Change project and 1 Million Women project.

In 2007 she stood with 20 others in the Climate Change Coalition for the Upper House elections in NSW.

Laughing at the suggestion that she is unwittingly refashioning traditional perspectives of architecture, she confesses that it troubles her that green architects are priced beyond the budget of the majority.

'That's one of my greatest challenges,' she says. 'As soon as an architect becomes involved the price goes up.'

'Yet, well-designed buildings consume no energy and at the very least we should be aiming for net zero-energy and net zero-water houses.'

'A sustainable system is a system, not individual parts, and only by us all working together can we achieve this.'

