

up close

Col James

Fire in the belly of an architect

Geraldine O'Brien

Col James leans forward, his eyes bright with enthusiasm: "Now here's one that will appeal to you ... We're working on a 10-bedroom house for students, using the Saturday Herald. We bond it onto corrugated metal and it's terrifically strong, and it's all structurally tied together with blue packaging tape ... I think that's a bit of a breakthrough."

Well, yes. And a world away from the sleek, high-tech materials most of his fellow architects choose for their building blocks. But James has always been a bit different. He took 10 years to meander through an architecture degree, studying sculpture for some of it, and breaking off to study landscape architecture part-time, and then a degree in planning because he thought that "planners were really calling the shots".

He found to his chagrin, however, that it wasn't planners but politicians who were calling the shots, so he stood four times - unsuccessfully - for Sydney City Council. "Tom Uren said I'd never make a politician. 'Mate,' he said, 'you just haven't got the killer instinct.'"

The understatement was phenomenal, yet James has made a difference. In bestowing the President's Award on him this year, Caroline Pidcock, who heads the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in NSW, said: "There are some people who decide that they will make a difference with their life. There are fewer who are actually able to act on this brave decision and effect the change they dream of."

James, the director of the Housing Research Centre at the University of Sydney, was one of them, having developed "a responsible and refreshing social agenda".

There are two projects on the boil: the redevelopment of The Block in Redfern for Aboriginal housing and getting the first CRASH (Construction Industry for Relief and Assistance for Sydney's Homeless) projects under way - the latter being the beneficiary of Thursday's "Open Practices" day, where architects across the state will offer their services for a nominal \$50 fee, which will go to CRASH.

The organisation is modelled on a British group, whose activities James studied first-hand on a fellowship in London. He learnt that, from its modest beginnings, it now houses 30,000 people a night across Britain. He also learnt it was essential to ensure the group's first projects were winners, and he is maximising the possibilities for success with a scheme to make the Waverley and Woollahra councils' old incinerator at Waterloo into accommodation and studios for 10 artists.

From his experience a few years ago negotiating between squatters and the developer Australand at Broadway, James developed with the UTS Community Law and Legal Research centre a model "caretaker lease" for temporary housing.

The idea is to take vacant buildings, adapt them quickly and cheaply, and use them as temporary housing. Under the model lease, the building owner is assured of vacant possession when it is required, public risk insurance and "caretaker training" are provided, while the tenant group fits out the accommodation with help from the construction industry and council.

There are benefits for the owner, too. Occupied buildings are cheaper to insure, council rates are less and there is the possibility of a development



PHOTO: SAHLAN HAYES

Col James
67, architect
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"bonus" in return for the social good delivered. In James's own electorate of Bligh (he lives in the Chippendale end of it, not the posh end), "a rough count" indicates there are about 700 people on the streets on any one night in various "hot spots" such as Surry Hills, Central Railway and Belmore Park.

Some of the homeless, he acknowledges, just want to be left alone. But even they are "still quite amenable to having a place where they won't be kicked to death, and where they can have a locker to store stuff".

James sits on South Sydney Council's homeless committee and on its public art committee, arguing for artists' space in Green Square and for affordable housing. "My big push round here is to get at least 20 per cent affordable housing," he says. "At Green Square it's only 3 per cent. Pathetic. In North Eveleigh they've got it up to 6 per cent but we're still arguing for 20 per cent."

He carried out his own experiment in affordable housing years ago, buying the Chippendale factory he still lives in, with 10 friends. Calling themselves The Dempsey Family (after the factory rather than the fighter), they went head-to-head with South Sydney Council, arguing through numerous court cases their right to adapt it for co-operative living.

"All up it cost us \$10,000 each to buy it, pay some of the court costs and fix it up for 10 people, and we thought that was pretty good," James recalls. "The notion of reworking an

existing building was at the heart of it; the idea of the architect as a doctor to keep buildings working, rather than just knocking them off."

As a young architect working at Stephenson & Turner in the late '60s, James was assigned to an old-people's centre at Arncliffe for the Salvation Army. When a job engages his heart, he goes with it fully: "I worked with a wonderful woman called Colonel Olive Allitt and I used to go to rallies, thumping the tambourine, I loved it, I threw everything into it. It was the nicest job I'd ever had to that point and I told my boss I didn't want to work on any more office buildings, that they weren't doing anything for people in the street."

At Redfern, James is working closely with the Aboriginal Housing Company on 62 dwellings that will house about 350 people to replace the notorious Block. "Being a local, I've done a lot of work for the [Aboriginal] Medical Service, the legal service and so on. It's why I'm still here. The Block got totally fucked up and I want to help fix it. This is my community."

James is optimistic that, this time, it will work. "Architects should work for the anonymous clients, people who don't have a voice, who couldn't afford architects. That's where I thought architects could make a difference." ■

National Architecture Week, co-ordinated by the RAIA, begins on Monday.