

The Inner-City Housing Team and their work on infill development in Glebe

An interview with the lead architect John Gregory, by Ian Stephenson, Planning Convenor

In Glebe John Gregory was in charge of the architectural team while Brian Asterio led the planning consultations that informed the scheme. The social planning was important because it helped understand the tenants needs and desires when it came to housing.

Low density is good social planning, there are several studies which demonstrate that 5 storeys is the maximum height which allows people to feel a sense of connection to the street. Social housing tenants have diverse backgrounds, and some have special needs. Low rise development which does not necessitate the use of lifts and long corridors gives tenants greater agency in determining who they mix with.

In the 1980s the British approach to designing new buildings in historic neighbourhoods was that they should not be expressive but that they should be circumspect. The Housing Commission team took a different approach which was that expression should not be suppressed provided the designs used scale, form and a carefully considered architectural vocabulary to relate to the existing buildings.

Russell Jack (1925-), principal of Allen Jack and Cottier and a teacher and later Professor at UNSW, influenced the development of John Gregory's architecture with his view that good design must have about it an element of delight. Another influence was Ted Mack, who was Assistant Chief Architect at the NSW Housing Commission in the early 1970s.

As well as understanding the tenants needs the other fundamental consideration in inserting new development into Glebe lay in developing a deep understanding of the subdivision. John Gregory said if the new work was to be successful, the designer had to understand the rhythm of the subdivision. The *rhythm is what ties things together*, [using it to inform the new work] *is what will make it work*.

There are a number of things came together in the late 1980s to create this excellent infill in Glebe.

Key points were:

- A willing client (the NSW Housing Commission)
- A skilful team of architects
- Good social planning which meant the tenants needs were understood
- A considered reading not just of the architectural vocabulary of the St Phillips Estate but how it all fitted together
- Being prepared to design buildings which were creative in their own right, which meant that the designs had a sense of joy and zest

The group worked as a team but there were lead architects for particular projects. The four terrace houses at 2A-D Wentworth Park Road were designed by a young architect Steven Nihlas. The flats at 17-31 Cowper Street were by David Tory. John Gregory's work includes the flats at 15-23 Catherine Street and 4-16 Mt Vernon Street, Glebe.

The project added 1,000 bedrooms, in various configurations of flats and houses, to Glebe in a way which complemented the historic suburb, rather than detracting from it. The maximum height was three storeys. It also respected the neighbourliness of the Glebe by providing verandahs were residents could engage with the street from their own territory.