

Plumbing the depths of simple home repair

Sydney architect Paul Pholeros aims to improve Aboriginal wellbeing. Picture: Sue Williams

SUE WILLIAMS THEAUSTRALIAN 12:00AM August 28, 2010

By fixing straightforward problems, Healthabitat has transformed lives in remote communities

HE was a single dad with five small children, living near the South Australian start of the Birdsville Track, and he was struggling to cope. With only one cold-water tap working, in the back yard of the rickety 1940s-built house, the children were often sick with bacterial infections. There wasn't electricity to the outside toilet, so it didn't have a light. As a result, the smallest youngsters said they were too scared to go in there at night and frequently wet their beds instead.

But help came. Workers arrived from the not-for-profit company Healthabitat, along with trainees from the local community, and plumbed in a hot-water tank so the family could have hot showers, installed a light in the toilet and ripped out the old coppers from their concrete bunkers and fitted a proper laundry.

Sydney architect and Healthabitat director Paul Pholeros recalls: "You can give everyone all the statistics on the terrible state of so much Aboriginal housing, but it's the human stories that stay in your mind.

"Just by spending a small amount on fixing simple problems, like fixing toilets that have never flushed, or providing a working hot-water system or making sure people have an area where they can wash and prepare food, can make a huge difference to people's lives. Improving people's living environments can lead to massive improvements in their health and wellbeing."

It's a mantra that has occupied the collective mind of this architect and his Healthabitat "family" for 24 years and has led to a landmark not-for-profit project that has transformed the lives of more than 50,000 Aborigines. Healthabitat's program also has unravelled the reasons for such a poor state of public housing.

While popular myth has it that vandalism is the cause of much of the poor conditions, Healthabitat's research since its start in 1991 revealed that the incidence of deliberate damage was minuscule. Instead, 65 per cent of housing defects are a result of normal wear and tear, often because poor quality fixtures have been installed in the first place, and a lack of routine maintenance by housing authorities.

The remarkable improvements to people's health as a result of Healthabitat fixing simple problems are being detailed by reports submitted to several medical journals for peer review in Australia and overseas. The results also are being studied by health professionals overseas who are adapting the principles to help disadvantaged communities from New York to Nepal.

The project began when Pholeros, who'd been hired to design a health clinic in the Great Victoria Desert, west of Alice Springs, was corralled by the then director of the local Nganampa Health Council, Yami Lester. He was put in a room with thoracic physician Paul Torzillo and Alice Springs anthropologist and community development worker Stephan Rainow, and asked to come up with answers to why indigenous health wasn't improving, despite more being spent on care.

When Pholeros and his colleagues, each working as volunteers in their spare time, started visiting Aboriginal communities, they were startled to discover that electrical systems were safe in only one in 10 houses, only one house in 20 had a working kitchen and fewer than one-third had a working shower.

"So when people talk about diabetes in Aboriginal communities, they often don't think in terms of those people not having decent kitchens where they can prepare and cook food," Pholeros says. "And when they think of health, they assume most people will have a working shower to make it easy to wash themselves. The reality is very different."

Torzillo is even blunter. "A lot of the problems we're seeing today aren't about income but about being able to control your own environment," he says.

"There may be a number of complex problems, but they're all being compounded by the most simple of issues to do with housing. If you can't have a shit in your own house, and wash the kids and put food somewhere you can keep clean, then your personal feeling is one that you're overwhelmed by your circumstances.

"If something's done about these conditions, and it's usually something that's very easy and straightforward, then lives can be improved exponentially."

So far, in the past 10 years Healthabitat has employed and trained more than 1200 Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and contracted a further 300 tradespeople of all ethnic origins to fix 98,872 defects in more than 6600 Aboriginal-occupied houses in 170 locations. It's in stark contrast to the \$5.5 billion National Partnership Agreement for Aboriginal Housing, which has built only 33 houses, and the \$672 million Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program, which has provided seven completed homes in 2 1/2 years.

As for the deterioration in housing, Pholeros and his team found inferior products routinely were put into kitchens and bathrooms in remote areas, flimsy fittings not up to the harsh environments in which they were used. In rural areas, bore water eats the heart out of poor-grade water systems. In most cases, more suitable products could have been used to avoid problems occurring. The second problem, accounting for 25 per cent of faults, is poor initial construction and incorrect products or specifications.

"In one house, we found light switches on walls but there had never been any wires installed," says Pholeros, an award-winning architect and an adjunct professor of architecture at the University of Sydney who works for his self-named company on projects across the world.

"Those problems are probably a result of poor supervision, the fact it's hard to get people to inspect work done in rural and remote areas, and self-certification, where trades certify their own work. A lot of contractors simply won't go back to finish off their work when they have to travel so far to do so, and they're waiting on the collection of only, say, 5 per cent of their total fee. As a result, some of the houses we see are highly dangerous."

Less than 10 per cent of faults were found to be a result of overcrowding in homes, misuse, abuse or vandalism. "When you have 20 people living in a two-bedroom house, you would expect it to fail quite quickly," Pholeros says.

The difficulty is that terrible housing conditions tend to continue when they're coupled with residents who are too anxious to complain, don't have money to spare or have grown up or lived so long in houses with toilets and showers that don't work they assume it's normal.

"There's no point talking about the bigger issues like better housing design if someone's standing in three inches of shitty water," Pholeros says. "Many people believe the situation with Aboriginal housing is too complex to tackle. But what should be done isn't a mystery."

Paul Pholeros is one of the people profiled in Outback Spirit: Inspiring True Stories of Australia's Unsung Heroes, by Sue Williams, published by Penguin next Tuesday (\$32.95).



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