

## Episode 83

# Can You Live Sustainably in a City?

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/83](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/83)

**Intro:** Author and environmental consultant Michael Mobbs is my guest today. He's written two books - Sustainable House and Sustainable Food - and is seen as a thought leader in Australia. So this was a great opportunity for a 'bigger picture' interview on sustainable living (rather than building houses).

I started by asking Michael when he became passionate about the environment.

**Michael:** When I was about six, on a farm out west, we were flooded and I didn't get to school for four months. The plane would come and drop off food in a sugar bag and go on to the next farm. And I learnt then of the might of the climate. That's been a gift, I think. So I didn't decide, I just had the environment, in a sense, forced on me as a child.

**Ben:** It's interesting to me that we're talking right in the middle of Sydney city at the moment. So that's a very different contrast. Do you feel more secure here or can you see exactly the same problem, that one day we might face that situation where we don't have those resources in front of us?

**Michael:** That's a great question. How did a boy from the Bush, the country of Australia, where I had a three sixty degree horizon and I was an hour from town by car, how did I end up right in the heart of Sydney? I got here by degrees but it's clear to me now that I couldn't go back. And I stay here because I have got my fingers in a lot of pies, whether it's the pie of a nearby bookshop where I can go and buy something that's just caught my eye or I can go and sit alone and be anonymous, or I can go out with some friends tonight and eat food that has integrity to it.

I know that if I were to go ten kilometres west from here, leaving the inner city, that I would be in an alien and unfriendly world where people like me who are regarded as different would be unwelcome. So I feel rich here. I feel in my own three sixty degree horizon. It's just that it's crowded. As I speak to you, I have two chooks down the side of the house, I have a little beehive with native stingless

bees and I have some little houses for micro bats. They're about as big as a fifty cent coin. And I have grapes and all that sort of thing. So it takes me a couple of days still to ride around my estate here on my horse, in my mind. But you can make your place your private world if you wish to, no matter where you are. Whether you're Nelson Mandela in a jail cell, whether you're just a boy from the Bush trying to make sense of things as we are now as we speak.

Ben: In that sense then, a house is perhaps different to how we've always talked about it before in this podcast, that it's very much the nuts and bolts of how you build it. What is it for you?

Michael: When I bought the house in 1978, it was a brothel and seven women worked here. The agent said, "Mr Mobbs, why do you want to live in cheap town with criminals and prostitutes? Live in Chippendale." And I thought that would be fine. It was a tough suburb, now it's blander. There are people here mostly with money.

And as I changed, so did the meaning of the house change for me. I confess – and if any of your listeners repeat this, I'll deny it – I practiced law for nineteen years so I'm on a long journey back to re-join the human race and I married, I had children. I had a divorce. And the house changed for those different passages of my life. Now it's a place for me to find solitude, although that's a strange thing to say. I've had over nineteen thousand people through the house. I'm actually just content to be here and to have a place that's easy to walk from to get food, company. I don't need to own a car. So to me, I'm rich in that many of the things that I have, access to really high quality doctors, all those things are here and I can get to them by foot or phone pretty well.

Ben: Why do you open your house?

Michael: There's a wonderful line in The Beatles song "Why Don't We Do It in the Road?" I think it's a John Lennon piece. He was writing about really living his private life in public. Sometimes it feels as though I've trained the guns on my own positions and I'm by turns, sick of Michael Mobbs who people know of and sick of Michael Mobbs who does interviews like this. And then I think "well, get over it. It's just something that you do. Just do it and stop being grandiose about it."

The reason I think I do it is the same as when it first occurred to me to open the house up which is it's such an ordinary house. As you and I speak to each other and the light is on here, unless I told you, you wouldn't know it was coming from the sun. Unless I told you the

glass of water I'd poured you had come off the roof, unless I told you that the toilet water was recycled sewage, you wouldn't know it. It's an ordinary house and the power of this house is that it's not a narcissistic "look at me" place, it's an ordinary house. And people come in and they say "wow, it's just an ordinary house." That's a really big thing because lawyers, engineers, architects, planners, the media have mystified and complicated sustainable living and people think it's outside their reach and they have to be special to do it.

The second reason is that the house has lots of mistakes and we can share those here and people can see that you can still do these things, make mistakes, and do something that has value. So you don't need to be perfect, you don't need to be special and those are strong messages that the house sends, I think.

Ben: When I arrived here, you mentioned to me that – I don't know, perhaps I picked up on this – that you were constantly learning about houses. Would you like to build your own house one day?

Michael: I'm not really someone to have around the house. I'd be the last person you'd want. I can barely change a lightbulb and if I do, I talk about it with pride for weeks. So this is a house for a complete dope. Not a real man. And a shiver of fear went through me when you suggest I might build my own house. [Ben laughs.]

What I do know now with certainty is that most of what I've done and called sustainable is, in fact, not. The house changed my life and I started doing things for which I had no qualifications. I wanted to win and did win - I tended to build or fit out Google's new offices in Sydney and I was really keen to understand their thinking. And I discovered that the fifty third employee for Google was a chef who was passionate about local food and providing really good food for them. This is back in '98 or '99, just after the company had started. And I knew that the building was going to be a star building because it had all these things that were said to make it sustainable and I discovered that they were trivial.

I discovered that an ordinary meal of a slice of toast, an egg, a small punnet of yogurt, a tomato and a couple of slices of bacon required, if it were produced and wasted in the typical way of Australian food, would need over eleven hundred litres of water. So Google had three hundred people in the office at that time. So that's three hundred thousand litres of water for breakfast, three hundred thousand litres of water for lunch, a million litres of water a day to feed the three hundred Google people. The building's

systems and this house's systems are trivial. My tummy requires twenty to forty times more energy and water than does my house.

So the long answer to your question is I'm still discovering what sustainability is and I'm not spurred on to build my own house. I would like, sometimes – and I'm thinking of moving out of this house just to test this – I would like to be in a small house of about two rooms beside the coast, in a very expensive area. I'd like to have this large block of land with a very small house and the house would be populated by a box of books, three or four types of Australian whiskey and that would be it. Then I'd get around in sandals and shorts. Everything in the house would be recycled. The idea that I had of sustainability when I did this in 1996, nineteen years ago, is very different to the idea I have now.

I'm building a house this year, in seven days, entirely of recycled material. Not one tree will die for this house. And the idea of using plantation timber and calling that sustainable is just wrong. We've killed enough trees and we've got enough timber, concrete, glass, steel out of the Earth. She can't take any more holes dug in her, trees cut down. So if I were to build a house on this block of land or anywhere, if I were to do that now, everything would be recycled, made in a factory in good working conditions, so that the number of trips, the wastage and everything would be basically be as small as they could be.

Ben: Throughout the interviews that I have done for this podcast and just thoughts that I've had over the last few years, it seems that nothing is sustainable and it's all about limiting your impact on the planet. And I see where you're going but in my mind, we've got to get to the point where each of us knows that damage that's going on. And I'm not saying it's an easy calculation or way to find out. That would at least allow you to compare and contrast and work a way down. For example, I've flown out here to Australia and perhaps the reason I did it was because I knew all my family would be out here this Christmas and I knew my wife loves Australia and wanted to come. But there's a huge impact in travelling all the way over here and I was chatting to someone on email and they said 'oh well you can offset it by just switching off your heating for the next two years' which made me think 'oh great!'

Michael: One of the world's finest journalists is from the UK, George Monbiot who writes for The Guardian. He doesn't travel any more for speaking engagements because once it's up there, you can't take it out. I mean, no-one has saved a planet before. We really need to be humble as we deal with this and say 'well, we're just doing our

best'. I agree with you, it would be good if six or seven billion people could be part of this conversation but it's clear now we don't . . . I think three things are clear.

Firstly, greenies are the great political losers of the last fifty or sixty years. Secondly, that we don't have the time to persuade six or seven billion people to change the way they live and thirdly, that if we were to get this thing done in the time that's required, the next five or ten years in my view, the only way to do it is through the market place. And rather than fighting against the marketplace or seeking to persuade people as greenies do I think we need to divide that strategy into two parts. Firstly, we need to be clear with ourselves that it's more difficult to get approvals for and to get tradespeople and materials and more expensive to go sustainable, both in buildings things and in buying them, day to day. And secondly, that we must find existing, proven market mechanisms which will work to make it cheaper and easier to build and live sustainably. And I believe in some trials I'm conducting this year, that I've got an option that's tried and proven. So I'm really keen to look back this time next year and see whether or not what I try to do this year has got merit.

Ben: I'm taking people on my journey of building a house and we are all of a similar mind-set that we want to live as best we can. We're probably realists and we know it's not going to be perfect. Is there anything that you would like to say or to pass on that could help that person?

Michael: Two things. Firstly, you don't have to be special to do this or rich or qualified. That just has to come from your passion. So hold on to that, no matter what obstacles you will inevitably come across. The second thing is don't see yourself as a failure if you don't do everything at once. For example, say you're listening to this and you say 'oh he sounds like a reasonable enough bloke but the idea of reusing my sewage to wash my clothes and flush my toilet and hose my garden is unacceptable to me and I want to keep putting it into the sea so it can swim with the fishes'. Try to see that barrier not through your eyes but through the possible future sale of the property and future plumb your house. So do run that second pipe to the clothes washing machine and the toilet so that should the market change, you can sell it as future plumbed, ready to be connected up for a sewage or grey water recycling system. Don't see what you're doing as just for you, see it for a future buyer and that will build some flexibility in your thinking. Does that answer your question?

Ben: I think so. Moving on to a different aspect of all of this, providing food, you have touched on it throughout the interview. How has that changed your thoughts and what do you do in your daily life to try and keep yourself connected with food growing?

Michael: So picture a suburb where I live where most of it is asphalt and concrete and buildings and if there's a bit of road verge, it's pretty poor soil and probably most of the soil is dead. When I discovered that food is the second highest source of climate pollution after coal fired power in Australia, I started growing food here and then I started growing food out in the street and again, I did it badly. A lot of what I grow dies. But it changed our suburb bit by bit and we grow some of our food here now and the street's cooler as a result. So we and the Chippendale community can harvest bay leaves, rosemary, lemongrass, just some pretty hardy plants from the streets. And we do. In addition – but we probably get no more than half or one or two percent of those things you need from the streets or our gardens.

The second thing I do is I go to farmer's markets where I can talk to the farmers and know how they grow. And in doing so, I give them money they wouldn't get if they sold their products through chain stores.

And thirdly, I can support food box services where farmers who can't get to the markets can provide their food in a retail system that bypasses the commercial or chain store markets. I think they're well named as chain stores. They chain farmers down in – people need to be clear. If they're going to buy something from a chain store, say it costs a dollar, the farmer will get no more than five or six cents, possibly ten cents in that dollar. When I buy something from a firm at the farmer's markets, he gets the whole dollar.

Ben: You mentioned community in that answer too and I get this gut feeling that communities are actually going to become more and more important than it's ever done before. What are your thoughts on community?

Michael: It is. We have a strong community here. People are proud of our streets, the kids are proud of it. We've got a little library across the road the kids painted and one of the girls goes out and checks it to see what books are in it for people to come and take, quite often. And there's a real resilience here and we come together.

Unfortunately, some of the things we want to do have been rejected by governments because they threaten or undermine the sources

of income for governments. When I look at the light that's shining now, I know that in addition to the power that came from the sun seven minutes ago, there's surplus power going in to the grid and I'm being paid for that. So I pay no electricity bills. I pay no water or sewage bills because I'm not connected so I'm denying money to government owned businesses. It's funny in a dry country that governments set up businesses to profit by selling money. So the more water they sell, the more money they make. So a lot of the things that would sustain our culture threaten governments in different ways. So for example, the idea we have of getting rid of the garbage truck because we're going to recycle all our food and compost it here threatens the men who like to drive big garbage trucks.

That's why even though communities can be articulate and strong and quite savvy in the way they deal with governments, at the end of the day, the only way I think to get the significant change needed in the way we consume food and materials has to be in a way that's going to work in mainstream chain stores or appliance stores and so on. And that's what I'm working on this year.

Ben: We're getting towards the end of our time. I've really enjoyed this. But being here in Australia, is there anything that is unique or issues that Australian's really need to get to grips with?

Michael: I think we're about to go through a huge change in Australia. We are the lucky country. There are just twenty two million of us. Very few of us have ever woken up wondering if we'll have food on our plate. We're well fed, we're a long way from centuries old hatreds but over a third of our food which is grown for export is about to implode. The Murray-Darling River System is in a death spiral. Most of it has got coal, gas, oil leases over it. Most of it is extremely vulnerable to climate change and in 2008 when there were thirty two countries who ran out of grain, you couldn't buy rice on the shelves of American Walmart stores because Thailand, one of the major rice producers, had failed, a rice crop had failed in China.

Australia is ill equipped to deal with shortages of food and we don't have the discipline that this country and America, England and other countries had during the depression of 1928 to 1934 depression when although a lot of men and women were out of work in England, they played in the streets and they had some happy lives. Now, I'm not sure how our comparatively ill-disciplined society will cope with it being difficult to get work or have food when that occurs. It's not a question of 'if' but 'when'.



The second big problem I think facing Australia is we have a political class which is now at the end of its use by date. The parties are so different from the days of their creation when they were ordinary men of vision and passion. Now they've really become the property of a political class and they give access to the wealthy. They really just don't connect any more. We have, I think, leaders like those that we had during World War One when millions of men were sent to their certain death by failed generals and politicians and I don't think we've got a political class with the calibre to deal with the huge institutionalised problems we've got in this country which are about to burst upon us over the next four or five years.

Ben: That's probably a good point to leave it, just unless you have one final thought?

Michael: I don't want to end this conversation by focusing on the failure of our political class or our culture. I want to come back to why I did this house. I did this house because I didn't like the sound of my own voice. I was saying 'the government should do this, the government should do that'. And now that I look back and see that I accepted that it's my own excreta, it's my own need to have energy at the power point that I need, as soon as I accepted the responsibility for meeting my own needs, that whinging, complaining tone left my voice and a part of me grew back that had been killed off by relying on governments to do things. And that's what gives me hope, is the fact that you're interested in talking about this, that so many people now are interested in doing things without government support.

Ben: Michael, thank you very much.

Michael: You're welcome.