

## **Chris Johnson: Full Steam Ahead**

By Bettina Deda

His first trip on board the *Stirling Castle* half way around the world must have planted the seeds for his enduring love of travelling. It was 1946, and one-year-old Chris Johnson travelled with his English mother from London to Sydney, Australia – his father’s country of birth.

Chris’ father, Peter Johnson, served as a pilot in the Royal Australian Air Force in England during the Second World War when he met his wife. He was shot down over occupied France and disappeared for eight months, his family and friends fearing the worst. No one knew where he was until the Americans arrived and he emerged from the French Underground. He could finally return to England and his young bride. “I suspect this reunion was the start of my life,” Chris smiles at me across his desk in his office high above Martin Place in Sydney’s CBD.

Although born in Kent in the UK, Chris calls himself Australian. When I ask the acting CEO of the Urban Taskforce Australia about the most important things he has done in his life, travelling and connecting with the rest of the world come top of his list.

Infected by the travel bug from a very young age, he departed for a seven-month journey shortly after graduating from Sydney University with a Bachelor of Architecture in 1968. When he came across the opportunity to purchase a VW Kombi van through the German Export Delivery Program – “for half price and no

tax”, he explained laughing in short bursts – he decided there and then to buy it. Together with his first wife, he flew to Bombay [now Mumbai], to collect their new vehicle. The van became their mobile home for the next seven months while they travelled through India, Nepal – where they picked up some friends for company – Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and via Europe to London. “It was quite a long trip, and we could go and stop anywhere, in remote places and cook in the van.”

They stayed in London from 1970 to 1973 where Chris worked as an architect. During this time, the VW Kombi van hit the road again – from the UK to Scandinavia before heading south to Italy and Northern Africa. After exploring Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, they crossed the Mediterranean to Spain and returned to London, where they stayed at his grandmother’s house. Arriving home from that second epic journey, the van was parked in the garden where two days later a falling tree broke it in half. Although the vehicle was Made in Germany, it could not withstand the forces of Mother Nature. It was the end of the van, but maybe this incident was a sign of the universe to tell the avid traveller that it was time to settle down.

In 1973, Chris, his wife and their first daughter moved back to Sydney. “With a young kid, and the English weather not being as seductive as the Australian climate, we decided to return to the Land Down Under.”

From friends he had heard that the place where all the action happened was the Government Architect’s Office. “They said ‘bring a portfolio, come and talk to the people’, so I went in and talked to them.”

His can-do attitude combined with his mantra to connect with people secured him a job in this prestigious organisation, which, influenced by Gough Whitlam's Labor government, was focussing on new ideas about public buildings, such as schools, colleges and hospitals. It was "a buzzing office where a young architect got three to four projects every few months. We innovated dramatically and worked on a totally new approach to primary school education with open spaces, no walls, just curtains," Chris described his early career. "I worked on schools all over NSW; it was an interesting period of innovation."

At the age of 35, he became the youngest president of the NSW Institute of Architects, an achievement that enabled him to drive the organisation in a new direction.

Curiosity, creativity and change seem to run like red threads through his life. Being involved in designs for buildings that are socially important is number two on his list of most important things. Followed by becoming the Government Architect of NSW. "To get the top job was a good thing," he adds with considerable understatement.

During his time as the Government Architect (1995 - 2005), he was in charge of many important projects that shaped Sydney, one of which was the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games site. He created a task force, set up a master plan involving the key people and commissioned the American landscape architect George Hargreaves to convert the former dumping ground in Homebush into Sydney Olympic Park.

Other projects under his reign included the Circular Quay Passenger Terminal, Darling Harbour, Barangaroo and the Conservatorium of Music – one of his favourite undertakings. He pulled down some unsympathetic buildings around the original stables for Government House to allow the castellated Gothic style to shine and built new halls, library facilities, studios and offices.

He then went on to be the Executive Director of the NSW Department of Planning (2005 - 2009), where he developed master plans for six regional cities including Parramatta, Penrith, Liverpool, Newcastle, Gosford and Wollongong.

His enthusiasm for all things design is contagious and was entrenched at an early stage in his life. Did he have a role model? “My father had a fair influence on the direction I took,” he replies. When Peter Johnson returned from Europe, he participated in a special program for servicemen and studied architecture. “I was a bit reluctant at first to follow in his footsteps and explored engineering but ultimately was drawn to architecture. I guess, I was intrigued by the creative potential of this profession rather than the more arithmetical role of engineers.”

He then reveals that he was always good at art, in high school and at university and that he studied with the Australian landscape artist Lloyd Rees. “He [Lloyd Rees] was very good at saying how fabulous any drawing was even if it looked as messy and unstructured as possible.”

Sharing his love for art and drawing, I can't help express my admiration. Chris throws in his familiar laugh, with which he interlaces our conversation repeatedly

when he talks about what he has accomplished in his life. “Lloyd Rees encouraged me to loosen up, how to approach a drawing in order to release the creative potential that we all have,” he continues.

Chris’ excellent drawing skills become apparent when he shows me a bound book he had produced for his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday – an impressive collection of his drawings and sketches from travel destinations around the world. Flicking through the pages, he proudly names some of the places he depicted in loose line drawings: India, Morocco, Spain, Bali, Venice, New Zealand. “I do love drawing and sketching,” he confirms when I ask him what he likes doing when he is not working on creating a more global look for Australian cities. When travelling, he explains, he usually sketches his observations in his notebook first and, later on, finalises his drawings with watercolours. This beautiful book showcases just one of Chris’ many talents and achievements.

And the list of Chris Johnson’s achievements is long. It started at Sydney Church of England Grammar School, aka Shore, which, according to Chris, taught him “a decent amount of discipline and was a good underpinning” for his further development. As many Australian schools, it was very much sport-focussed, and “the sport I ended up doing best was athletics.” Growing up near the Chatswood Golf Club, he used to go for long runs after school and perfected his middle-distance results. In his last year, he won “the 880, which was twice around the oval” and represented his school on some occasions. “That was quite a good achievement,” he adds in his typically unpretentious way.

When leaving high school, he knew he wanted to become an architect and enrolled at Sydney University where his desire to connect with people and explore new countries was met. He became involved in student politics, the architecture society and organising events. In the holidays, he used to travel for two to three months to Papua New Guinea and Singapore, where he worked for other architects. “It was all good fun,” Chris summarises his student years.

Would he have done anything differently? “Not really,” he replies, “as an architect and urban planner you can choose to be an expert in many areas: public buildings, schools, hospitals, railway stations, Indian slum clearance. It is quite an enabling profession.”

“When I started out, I attended courses about management styles and did the Myers-Briggs personality types test. I learned pretty quickly that I was hopeless in organising and structuring things but pretty good in more open, dialogue-oriented, creative projects.” He points to the piles of papers, brochures and folders that are scattered in several layers in a semi-circle in front of him. “Look at my desk. Those management courses forced me to work with lists.” Unexpectedly, he pulls out a notebook from under the paper pile and shows me his To-Do-List of five points for the day.

“To make sure I achieve things I need to balance the bits of my personality that are not as good as others. I force myself to work with lists and priorities. Otherwise, my ordered side of the brain is not as strong as it could be. I think if you want to achieve outcomes you have to balance your personality types.”

Combining this strategy with his insatiable curiosity and lifelong passion for exploring new creative avenues he completed three Masters Degrees after his Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Sydney in 1968. In 1990, he graduated from UTS with a Master of the Built Environment followed by a Master of Cultural Heritage at Deakin University in 2002. Together with his second wife, architectural journalist Davina Jackson whom he married in 1988, he undertook a Masters Degree in Architecture in History and Theory at the UNSW in 2008. All the while working in his different jobs and climbing the career ladder.

Several books and publications flowed out of his research for his Masters Degrees. Overall, he produced and was involved in 14 books, one of which was about Indian cities – his interest was sparked when he first travelled through the country with his VW Kombi van – where he analysed different types of urban development. As a result, Chris won the Byera Hadley Scholarship and travelled through India exploring the role of women architects in driving slum clearance programs.

*Australian Architecture Now* is another book he produced together with his wife, who was the editor of *Architecture Australia*. Then, there were a number of books related to events and conferences he organised. *Greening Sydney* flowed out of the organisation of a landscaping conference, *Homes.com* related to the Year of the Built Environment (2003) and elaborated on the mass production of homes.

In 2011, he took the lead at the Urban Taskforce Australia (UTA), a not-for-profit organisation representing property developers and equity financiers, and changed its course significantly.

“I had to get rid of the image of a complaining organisation and reposition the UTA as an innovative body. My goal was to transform it into a creative organisation which drives change and makes things happen.” With his visionary ideas about the future of global (Australian) cities, his vast experiences in project management and urban planning and his comprehensive education, he navigated the ship to new and exciting shores.

“I always need to produce something,” he explains. “First it was buildings, now I produce books and publications,” referring to the newsletters he distributes to his members and the wider community on a weekly basis and the *Urban Ideas Magazine* the UTA produces several times a year. The July 2016 issue, for example, looked at Mixed Use developments to create vibrant cosmopolitan cities. Something that is very close to the captain’s heart. “Our job is to put pressure on the government, to chase them up to make change happen.”

And Australian cities are changing. Fast. I mention the recent launch of the draft architecture and design policy by the NSW Minister for Planning, Rob Stokes, which will support good design outcomes and introduce new initiatives for key state projects. “An Architecture and Design policy is per se a good thing,” Chris admits “but we need to be careful that we have innovation, not just regulation. You can’t ask for good design and, at the same time, tell people what it’s going to look like.”

When Rob Stokes announced early October that Sydney achieved 30,191 housing completions in the last financial year, the UTA replied in a media release: “Over 30,000 completed new homes in the last financial year is an excellent achievement

across metropolitan Sydney, but we need to average over 36,000 new homes a year to meet the government's projection of 726,000 required over the next 20 years. In boom times, like now, we should be producing closer to 40,000 new homes a year."

*The Future State: NSW 2056* report, which was released in May 2015 and projects demographic workforce and housing trends across NSW over the next four decades, confirmed the rapid growth the state is expecting.

In 40 years' time,

- The NSW population will rise to 11.2 million people
- The NSW economy will be worth \$1.3 trillion dollars
- 24 per cent of the population will be aged 65 and over (up from 16 per cent currently)
- 1.8 million homes will be built

By 2055, the overall population in Australia will have climbed to 40 million (up from 23.7 million in 2015), according to the Intergenerational Report, which the Federal Government published last year.

Often, it is the fear of change that holds people back from exploring and discovering new things. "Australians have this fabulous idea of detached homes with gardens, which is fine with 2 to 3 million people but not with 4 to 5 million living in a city. That's when apartment buildings and urban planning come into play," Chris sums up the attitudinal issue of many Australians as a major problem. He quotes a 2011

survey from the Federal Government Productivity Commission about planning issues around the country, which unveiled that in Melbourne over 50 per cent and in Sydney over 60 per cent of the population were against any change.

To demonstrate that he is walking the talk, Chris and his wife downsized in 2015 from their family home of 30 years to a 2-bedroom apartment in the lively harbourside precinct of Walsh Bay. “A house is self-sufficient, you are not encouraged to go out. Apartment living is the opposite. You are outward-focused, you become part of a bigger network, your neighbourhood. I am walking to work, and we became part of the city life around us.” And there is always something fun to do when one of his nine grandchildren is visiting.

A poll commissioned by the UTA in 2015 underpinned that the popularity of urban living is increasing. ResearchNow asked over 1,000 people in Sydney who own, rent, invest or intend moving to an apartment and found that 56 per cent of Sydneysiders fit in one of these categories. “Those living in apartments represent 35 per cent of Sydney households with half being renters and half owners,” the poll revealed. The results prove that apartment living is attractive to a wide range of the population. 55 per cent of Gen Y (18 to 35 years) are looking to move into an apartment in the next five years; 45 per cent of apartment renters are Gen Y; 40 per cent of apartment owners are baby boomers; 74 per cent of retirees living in apartments have lived there for over five years. Location, affordability and public transport are the key drivers for most people to adopt an urban lifestyle.

Chris, who is still “firing away at the UTA”, enjoys bringing his strands of experience

together for the development of cosmopolitan cities. He recently travelled to Shanghai and Singapore to adopt best practices from Asian cities. Of course, he produced a publication about his findings. “There is too much of a comfort factor that Sydney should look more European, like London, Paris or Barcelona and not like Asian cities. But the time zone we are living in is Asia, not Europe. We want to open up the dialogue.”

No matter if one prefers Sydney to be more European or Asian, to play in the premier league of global cities Sydney needs to embrace the change and provide more high-density apartment living in decentralised urban precincts and, to connect the communities, implement a highly-efficient public transport infrastructure – following the example of European and Asian conurbations.

If he had the power to create a law, his choice would be a law that encourages diversity. “When people introduce laws they often have a vision that controls everyone to fit into a particular lifestyle, house, a way of doing things, places to work. Ultimately, there should be an overriding law about diversity that there is no single approach. We need to have variety, particularly, if you look at the composition of the Australian community. Diversity is a core part of our society. All other laws would need to be tested against my diversity law.” And his habitual laugh accompanies his newest idea.

Shortly after our interview, Chris flew to Bogota, Colombia, to connect with urban planners on an international level and to find out what’s happening around the world.

At 72, he is still steering the ship with full steam ahead. His engines are far from stopping. Powered by his vision to achieve a more global look for Australian cities. “We are a global city, part of a global network; we need to think that way.”

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