

Document 3: Alex Hoffman Transcript

Podcast: The Placemakers

Episode: Alex Hoffman – Energy Positive Architecture

Host: Stephen Burton

Guest: Alex Hoffman, Principal at Habitants

Stephen Burton: Today we are talking to Alex Hoffman. Alex is an architect trained and educated in the United Kingdom, now living and practicing in Southeast Queensland, Australia. Alex leads Habitants, a pioneering studio specializing in energy-positive architecture and urban design. So Alex, thanks very much for joining us today on the Placemakers.

Alex Hoffman: You're welcome. Looking forward to it.

Stephen Burton: So Alex, what was it about architecture that attracted you to the study and practice of it in the first place?

Alex Hoffman: I was very lucky that the environment I grew up in was a residential community/school for kids with learning difficulties where my father was principal. They went through a substantial building program, and I got immediate experience of the process of designing and building. The smell of concrete and sawed timber takes me right back. That was combined with an interest in fine art. I realized quickly that making a living from fine art was challenging, so I discovered architecture.

Stephen Burton: When did your interest in incorporating energy and energy-positive design in architecture happen?

Alex Hoffman: The context of my upbringing had an enormous influence—biodynamic gardening and working with seasons was normal. The interest waned after university but came back when we started Habitants. We decided our responsibility is to mitigate environmental impact, both from an energy point of view but also at a human level. Our built environment affects our health, mental health, and behavior.

Stephen Burton: Can you unpack "Energy Positive Architecture" (EPA)?

Alex Hoffman: It manifests in three interrelated principles:

1. **Energy:** The buildings or places we design will ultimately produce more energy than they need.
2. **Community:** We look outside and connect to the environment. Can we leverage that opportunity for the benefit of neighbors and the town?
3. **Well-being:** The ultimate outcome is that whoever uses the places are healthier and happier as a result.

Stephen Burton: Do you find yourself having to educate your clients around what it is you

want to do for them?

Alex Hoffman: Completely. We ask a simple question: **How would you like to live?** Until you fundamentally understand the "how," you can't find the solution. We have a mindset that if we can shift the dial by 1% for every person we work with, over time that becomes millions of percent.

Stephen Burton: When you're talking about connection to place, how do you think we can achieve those similar principles through the design of our public places?

Alex Hoffman: Ultimately, it's about people. I've always been fascinated that a lot of architects focus on *their* building. I think the interest and opportunity is understanding the spaces *in between* that building and whatever is already there. Those are the places where you can actually make a big difference. It's the relationship between the macro and the micro—zooming in and out.

Stephen Burton: What do you think is the most important ingredient to creating successful public places?

Alex Hoffman: Creating elements of a place that is welcoming to a passerby or a visitor. For example, the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart by James Stirling integrates a public footpath. You walk *into* the gallery and through it on your way through the city. Even when closed, you engage with the place. There's a richness and neighborliness in that. If you take away the person, it doesn't matter how well-designed the place is; it doesn't work.

Stephen Burton: Do we have a problem with being able to quantify metrics around this type of thing in public places?

Alex Hoffman: Absolutely. What's the human capital? If you create a place people want to go to, that has commercial benefit, but people are feeling happier and safer. It's hard to quantify because there's no direct monetary value.

Stephen Burton: Do you think there's a case to be made for educating our policymakers to ask for more rigor around creating public places that are energy positive in that holistic way?

Alex Hoffman: Absolutely. We need to go back and understand why something has or hasn't worked—lessons learned. We don't always look back at how people have *used* it or *feel* about it. Particularly in the public realm where budgets are tight, we should think about how to maximize the benefit of the spend before it's built.

Stephen Burton: Alex, thanks so much for joining us this afternoon on the Placemakers.