A Living Library Project

History of Children's Services in the Western Region

Creating Community in the Neighbourhood

by Meredith Sussex

(*Seeds for Change* document, 1978)

Creating Community in the Neighbourhood -
Neighbourhood Houses in the Western Region

Extract from "Seeds for Change"

published 1978

Republished by the Crow Collection Association as part of the 1992 Living Library Project on the History of Children's Services in the Western Region.

Booklet Number 8.

Illustration by Simon Kneebone from "Do It Yourself Social Research" by Yoland Wadsworth.

Introduction

Creating Community in the Neighbourhood

Neighbourhood Houses in the Western Region
Facsimile from "Seeds for Change"

In 1978 the Conservation Council of Victoria published the book "Seeds for Change - Creatively Confronting the Energy Crisis".

The book has four parts, firstly a section on the energy production and use, secondly, a section stating the technical and social principles which need to be applied to ensure efficient use of the world's energy resources, thirdly "the cluster and connect model" and lastly a section describing tentative beginnings of community-building in Melbourne.

The community-building section is called "The Seeds are There" and it consists of reports written by people involved in establishing community services during the 1970s.

Meredith Sussex was one of the contributors to this section. This facsimile from "Seeds for Change" captures the enthusiasm of this pioneering effort.

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The working papers of "Seeds for Change" are in the Crow Collection at the Victoria University of Technology (Footscray Campus). The Collection also has other documents about Neighbourhood Houses in the 1970s including Sophie Inwald's "Doing It together" which was published by Community Child Care in the late 1970s.

The authors of "Seeds for Change" were Deborah White, Philip Sutton, Alan Pears, Chris Mardon, John Dick and Maurie Crow.
The Victorian Government recognised the work of the "Seeds" team by presenting them with a Conservation Award in 1983.

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Creating Community in the Neighbourhood

Facsimile of pages

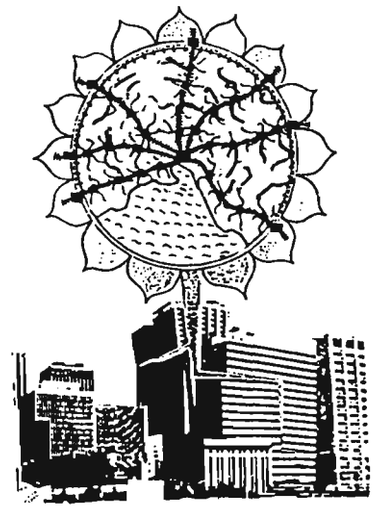
from

"Seeds for Changes –
Creatively Confronting the Energuy Crisis"

by

Deborah White, John Dick, Chris Marsdon,
Alan Pears, Philip Sutton and Maurie Crow.

Published 1978



Illustrations from "Seeds for Change - Creatively Confronting the Energy Crisis", published by the Conservation Council of Victoria, 1978.

CREATING COMMUNITY IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD TIER

Neighbourhood houses

The neighbourhood house is one kind of supportive community activity that fits into our model's second tier. In Melbourne there are nearly fifty operating. The following section looks at a few houses that are already flourishing.

Meredith Sussex was appointed to Sunshine Council in mid-1974. Her job was to set up community based child-care centres. She began work in a new Housing Commission area where there were 2,000 houses in the back-of-beyond and nothing else. At a council election meeting she began to get to know the local people and learn about their needs. She tells how these people set up their own neighbourhood houses.

Some of the mothers at the election meeting decided to call another meeting to talk about what facilities the area needed, particularly in relation to children. About sixteen people turned up to this meeting and they went back to the community to canvass the idea of a neighbourhood house. They were saying the Housing Commission should give us a house because they were building them all over the place. We approached the Housing Commission at that stage, and they didn't answer us. Then we decided we would put in a submission to the

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Children's Commission. We decided we wanted one neighbourhood house, but if we wanted one neighbourhood house we'd better say we wanted three. It would have been reasonable anyway. There were three quite separate and distinct areas in the estate bounded by roads and other physical things. So we applied for three neighbourhood houses.

They were beautiful submissions. About six or seven of us got together and wrote about what it was like to live in West Sunshine, the physical conditions of the area, the rock-hard soil, the centipedes and the snakes and things like that. It was really lovely. Some months later we got a letter to say we had got approval for three houses, which shocked everyone considerably. We all thought at that stage it would be just a matter of six months and we would be into them.

And, of course, the fact that we got approval for them meant that we got a lot more interest from other people. Now there were regular meetings with more people. There were informal play groups set up in each of the three areas — in alternate homes — they were a sort of base for the houses, and they were very much the idea of the people who had been involved in the beginning. They thought, "Well, we may as well start now, so we might as well swap around from house to house."

Then we wrote to the Housing Commission and said we wanted to buy three houses from them, and after four months of ignoring us they said no, they weren't going to sell us the houses. So, with the Council, we approached the local politicians. We wrote long and begging letters from all the people who had been involved, saying we were residents who needed housing but we also needed other things as well. And eventually we had a meeting with the Housing Commission, and the Housing Commission changed its mind and said they would sell the houses to us. By the time they finally agreed it was almost twelve months after we first asked. So you can imagine that during that time there had been a lot of disillusionment.

Finally we got the houses and we got the alterations done — not very substantial alterations. Each of the houses cost $30,000, and we had $2,000 alterations done on them and bought $4,000 worth of equipment. They were very small houses so we took out the passage wall and we put in some more plumbing, which all took time. This was the first time that Children's Commission money had been used to buy a house and so we had to go through government procedures which nobody knew much about. The government didn't know much about it, they hadn't even laid them down. I didn't know much about it, the people didn't know much about it. But it was good, because it meant that I didn't know much more about it than they did. I used to say, "I've no idea what we've got to do. We've got to work it out." We used to get quite dejected because of the interminable delays. At one meeting a woman said, "Never mind, we've all got together and that's the main thing." But we did work it out. Hassles and all.

Anyway, we finally got the houses, got them renovated and got them equipped and started to talk about what sort of services would be provided in each house. The people moved into the Killeen Street house before the alterations were finished because they got sick of moving from house to house and some of the people involved in it were working and badly needed all-day care. They just moved in, with bare floors

and all, and started with about eight kids. And they operated like that for about six months in various stages of getting it going. The Killeen Street centre is now registered for twenty child-care places. There are between fifteen and eighteen pre-school children up to kids of eight or nine. They have fourteen children for all-day care, which means about eight hours a day or more and also a number of casual part-time, emergency-type places. There are three paid staff, and the house stays open from 7 o'clock in the morning until 6.30 p.m. at night.

The houses very much reflect the interests of the people around them, so that two of the houses are very, very, different in style. I don't think that means that the people are so different between this area and that area on a Housing Commission estate. But because the whole area is fairly small, within cycling, if not walking distance, people with different sorts of interests and different sorts of values have been attracted to different sorts of houses, which is really good.

The houses started with women around children, but the fathers also have a lot to do with them. A lot of the men started to get involved because they moved in before it was all set up. The women were there with the kids in their "proper" role, and the men began to become involved more because there was work to be done — tiles to be laid and things like that — and they stayed on because they really liked the place. There are four or five fathers who are shift workers who regularly spend time at the centre. I really love going down there and seeing people like Bill Edwards, who does things like taking movies of the kids and then showing them to the kids on the wall.

Everyone in that estate has a neighbourhood house within "toddling distance". And, in fact, most of them are involved with the one that's closest to them. At Killeen Street there is the feeling that "this is our area". I don't mean they say, "Everyone else keep out." But if something goes wrong within that area, if there's someone sick, or someone dies, or something like that, there's a real sense of collective responsibility. People ask, "Anything we can do to help?" This is based partly on the old "we want to help", but it's also partly to do with "look, I know what you're going through because I've been in that situation, and the only reason I got out of that was because of other people helping me out". And that's a very real experience, and it happens over and over and over again. The neighbourhood house is truly supportive of the community's needs.

There are certain typical functions of the neighbourhood house. Having somewhere to care for children is the important thing and having a meeting place which is outside the home. People feel that they spend so much time in their home they don't want to spend any more time there. And particularly in working class areas, people don't want to feel their housekeeping is under scrutiny. They also feel they've worked very hard to get what they've got and don't want a horde of kids trampling over the new carpet because they're not going to be able to replace it for ten or fifteen or twenty years, or ever. And that's reality. And that's particularly the feeling in an area like a Housing Commission estate where people have been living in flats for a long time before they came there.

There aren't any old people in the estate. That makes it all the

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more necessary for us to make an effort to have old people involved. There's an elderly citizen's club which is quite close by, and one of the houses has adopted a couple of foster grandparents who come to the centre to be with the children on a voluntary basis.

I found out the other day that the local teenagers had discovered Killeen Street and made themselves a barbecue from some rocks in the backyard. They had made no attempt to break into the house, and they left the whole place incredibly neat. There was rubbish there, but it was in the rubbish bin. It was a real difference from the kids taking over an unoccupied house. We've never had any vandalism at all; the kids obviously regard it as being their own house. In one house they got inside through a window that had been left open that night and made themselves some coffee and left.

Most of the houses haven't got into formalised youth activities because they are a bit scared to have teenage kids there en masse. Although I think that could well come if they could get themselves used to the idea. The whole thing of a youth club is pretty scary to people. Teenagers are often very scary. Anyway, there are problems with the State Health Department on this.

A small number of the teenagers come and hang around, hang loose, have cups of coffee there, and they are completely accepted. But I think the adults would get overwhelmed if they had masses of teenage kids all the time. It's hard in a sense. Nearby there's one of those community halls that everyone built in the 1950s and it's never used except on Friday and Saturday nights and occasionally for cubs and brownies. The people using the neighbourhood houses are using them for twelve hours a day, and if they have meetings and things at night, they want to be sure that the place the next morning isn't going to look like it has been ripped asunder. They see the hall sitting there vacant and they think, "Why can't we use that?" But nobody wants to use halls! For a dance it's OK. For a concert it's OK. But you can't have a dance or a concert every night of the week. And kids, people of any age, just want a place they can go and hang around and talk, and have a cup of coffee and *be* there. So surely the adolescents need a neighbourhood house as much as anybody? They might need a separate wing to themselves, or a room to themselves. Everybody doesn't want to mix *all* the time.

Ideally, what I'd like to see for every neighbourhood house is a sort of garage as well, where kids can strip down cars and dad can do some carpentry and mum can too if she wants to. People can't do this in their own homes. They can't use specialist tools if each family has to buy its own set. But there's got to be a really high degree of responsibility if there are twenty babies or twenty pre-school children toddling around. You can't have people dropping cigarette butts in a place where small children are to be. It raises the whole problem of public space as opposed to private space.

In one of the centres there has been a conflict with youth, because there has been a youth group using it at night. Kids of thirteen to sixteen. And although they don't destroy things, they tend to be messy. Just little things like leaving crumbs on the floor so that the place gets infested with mice, things which really create hassles if they happen

regularly. What's going to happen is the adults are going to get together to pay a cleaner.

In a sense, the neighbourhood house at Deer Park is a more extraordinary story. There are sixteen nationalities involved at the centre in Deer Park; it's registered for twenty-two children. Everything from Turkish, Egyptian, Ceylonese, Yugoslav, Greek, Italian — the whole spectrum of migrants in Australia. The people originally involved applied for funds for a place to run their play groups from. They were women who were at home with their children. They didn't really want anything to do with child care for working mothers, partly because they felt it was too difficult and partly, I think, because they really thought at that stage that working mothers shouldn't go away and leave their children. At one stage I said, "You're only going to be using it for play groups between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. What are you going to do with the house for the rest of the time?" And they said it would be nice if they could have adult education and migrant English classes at night, and maybe an after-school programme for all those kids hanging around the streets at Deer Park. So they got their after-school programme going. That meant that they had small children coming in after school who were the children of working parents. And this broke down some of the barriers. The changing point came when one of the small children who was there said, "Look, can my mate who lives up the street come along?" One of the people at the centre went up to see the parents of this child and discovered that there was not only a five-year-old who was going home to an empty house, but a two-year-old who was being left alone for six hours a day. The woman who went to see the parents had been quite critical about women who go out to work and leave their children with others to look after. She rang me up and said they'd taken the child into the house and started looking after her. My immediate reaction was, "Ugh! What a terrible thing!" and she got very angry with me. She said "Well, what choice did she have? There's no child care in Deer Park. She didn't know anyone."

And that started it. It went on from there with people arriving on the doorstep saying all the time, "We're desperate. Can you look after our kids?" And they finally got to the stage when all the people involved with it were looking after other people's children *in their own homes* and taking the children to playgroups in the neighbourhood house, which could have been used a lot more. Child care was seen as the individual mother-who-was-looking-after-the-child's responsibility and not the centre's. But then they got together and decided that this was absolutely ridiculous. Here they were with this house, and they were all looking after children virtually in their own homes, and they were all tied down even more with all these children. And this was crazy. So they got together and formed themselves into a roster to look after the children in the house — a very logical solution. And it grew from there. The function of the house was changed to meet the needs of the area.

I spent a lot of time with a group called the West Sunshine Greek Ethnic Group. From this group, a more broadly based group got together to work towards starting child-care services. A most interesting thing about it is that there have been migrant English classes at the

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Ardeer South primary school for the last six years and they've never had an enrolment of more than about ten, despite the fact that it is in an area where there is the highest concentration of Greeks in the western suburbs. At the beginning of this year, six months after the group had been going, there were about forty enrolments, and they were nearly all people who had been connected in some way with the centre.

Because of the procedures it takes a long long time to get these centres going, which is something only the first generation of people involved will have to go through. But that experience is enormously valuable, something to do with having to fight for what you get. It's not just being handed to you for nothing.

At the beginning of 1976 a new primary school opened in the West Sunshine Housing Commission Estate. There were 600 kids in twenty-five portables. All the portables were on a gravel yard and there was no fencing, and there were no fire breaks burnt at the back, despite the frequent grass fires. The toilets were only moved in the day before the school opened and there were no steps to the toilets. When the parents took their children to the school they got together a group to protest. Very interestingly, and not surprisingly, the people who were involved in the protest were all people who had been involved in the child-care centres. And many of the people on the school council are people who have been involved in child-care centres.

The Alban Vale neighbourhood house has a youth club, which operates very well. Many of the people in Alban Vale are now very community minded. It's a fairly new housing estate between St Albans and Deer Park. What happened was that I got to know one of the women who rang me up and asked about play groups and I said, "Let's get together a group of people in your area. Let's not have you commuting to somewhere else." And she said, "Alright, let's try it." She didn't know anyone at all. Three of us leafletted every house; at that stage there were only 300 houses on the estate. We called a meeting and about fifty people came to it — that's the sort of place it is! — and the Alban Vale Residents' Association was formed. They were discussing the vexed questions of a community meeting place and a school for their kids. And the whole thing just grew like topsy from that. The council owned a house in the area that wasn't used. So I said to the council, "Look, there's all these people who want the house as a community meeting and child-care place. Let's give it to them." So they gave it to the residents to look after for a ten-year life span. The CRB will pull it down in ten years — if the Alban Vale Residents' Association will let them get away with it.

Once a month they make a day of it when they collect all the papers and bottles in the area and cash them in for money; they use the funds to develop the reserve. They got 450 trees from the council, and a roster of people watered them all summer. They hold fetes. They put out newsletters which have information and funny stories. The newsletter is all on first name terms with people in the estate. Now it's being translated into different languages. They're concerned with people speeding in the estate so if people are seen their car numbers are published in the next newsletter.

An interesting point is that the neighbourhood houses that have the most success are those which are in geographically defined areas and if there is a focal point where people can communicate. In the Sheffield estate all the children go to the South Sunshine primary school, apart from the kids that go to the Roman Catholic school. Everyone who wants milk or bread goes to the local milk bar. So that there are common focuses. And you can simply put out a notice through the local school and in the local milk bar and reach everyone in the estate.

Tottenham Tech. has a house which was bought with Schools Commission funds; and it's used for mums and kids as well as by the school. They run cooking, gardening and crafts for the boys at school, and all sorts of hobby, craft and other groups for women. Because the house was there, people got involved in it, and then they started to talk about using the facilities at the school itself; it didn't happen the other way around. There are classes during the day at the school, and the children of the women who are at the classes are minded at the house. It's a sort of reciprocal thing — you look after the children this day, I'll go to the classes the next day. Attached to the house there is a youth worker employed by the YMCA who does a lot of work with the kids out of school hours and with kids who are unemployed or who are not working. He runs a drop-in centre for kids from Braybrook. It's quite interesting because Tottenham Tech. has had the reputation of being the toughest school in the state. And it really is quite an amazing place nowadays.

The parents are also involved. Eddy Cook is a train driver. His wife, Diane Cook, got involved in the playgroup. And Eddie started coming down to the house because she complained that they didn't have a sand pit and he started to do something about it. Then he went on one of the camps, and he took up canoeing — he's now a canoeing expert and wants everyone else to canoe with him. He repairs and looks after the two canoes and he's making one with the kids. Eddie is now the president of the Tottenham North Primary School Council and involved with Tottenham Tech. school as well.

In my opinion the women who spend time sitting in their back yards get involved in neighbourhood centres and get terrifically self-confident and really together, and realise what a terrible isolated life they have had and go out and get a job. I had a very interesting conversation with a woman who has been very antagonistic to the whole idea of child-care centres. I met her coming out of one of the neighbourhood houses and she was just bubbling over, she was so excited. She was saying that her child was really happy and she was working half time. She hadn't realised that her child needed the company of other kids, and she hadn't been able to stand her when she was with her by herself. But she really got on well with her now and felt alive again. She had had the experience of other people telling her that her feelings were not hers alone.

I think that neighbourhood houses can play a really valuable role in any community. To provide the right situation, about one neighbourhood house to every hundred homes would be ideal.

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Food co-operatives

The food co-operatives and bulk-buying groups that are gaining popularity mostly operate at a neighbourhood level. With the continual rise in food costs and the decline of local shopping centres, more and more people are recognising the good sense in banding together to save money and effort by bulk buying and shopping together. What's more, much of the drudgery of shopping seems to vanish when it becomes a group activity. The distribution of bulk goods can involve other members of families, so each person can make a contribution, instead of "leaving it to mum". For many of the people involved in them, food co-operatives are not just a way of buying cheap food, they provide a means of buying unpackaged supplies and avoiding over-processed and chemical-laden food.

There are many examples of food co-operatives around Melbourne. A food co-operative register published in *Learning Exchange*, May 1977 listed nineteen. Obviously there are many more less formal bulk-buying groups.

Most co-operatives work on a fairly straight-forward basis. Capital is raised by charging a membership fee; this money buys initial stock. From that time, a small mark-up is added to the price of goods to cover spoilage and to provide further capital, if necessary. A fairly central storage area is needed as a base for the co-operative. Members of the co-operative then have to organise a roster of some kind so that orders can be collected, goods bought, orders made out and pick-ups or deliveries made. The neighbourhood house would provide an ideal centre for making such arrangements, and the shuttle bus between neighbourhood house and local focus a most convenient conveyance for such purposes because it would be specially fitted for big bulky parcels.

An interesting example of a food co-operative based in a number of households, comprising mostly students, is described here by one of its members.

Our food co-operative was initially set up by two members of our household of six. They obtained the names and addresses of people living in our area from the Down To Earth register (which resulted from the festival at Canberra in December 1976). These houses were contacted and a meeting arranged at our house to determine who was interested and the form our co-operative would take. Eleven houses (of four to six people in each) decided to take part. The co-operative works as follows:

- Wednesday night — all households take their order and money around to the house rostered to do the buying that week.
- Friday morning — the household on duty collates the orders, buys the fruit and vegetables at the Footscray Wholesale Fruit and Vegetable market and then sorts out the stuff for each house.
- Saturday morning — the member houses pick up their completed orders.

Dry goods are purchased only intermittently and all food is divided immediately to save on the setting up of central storage facilities.

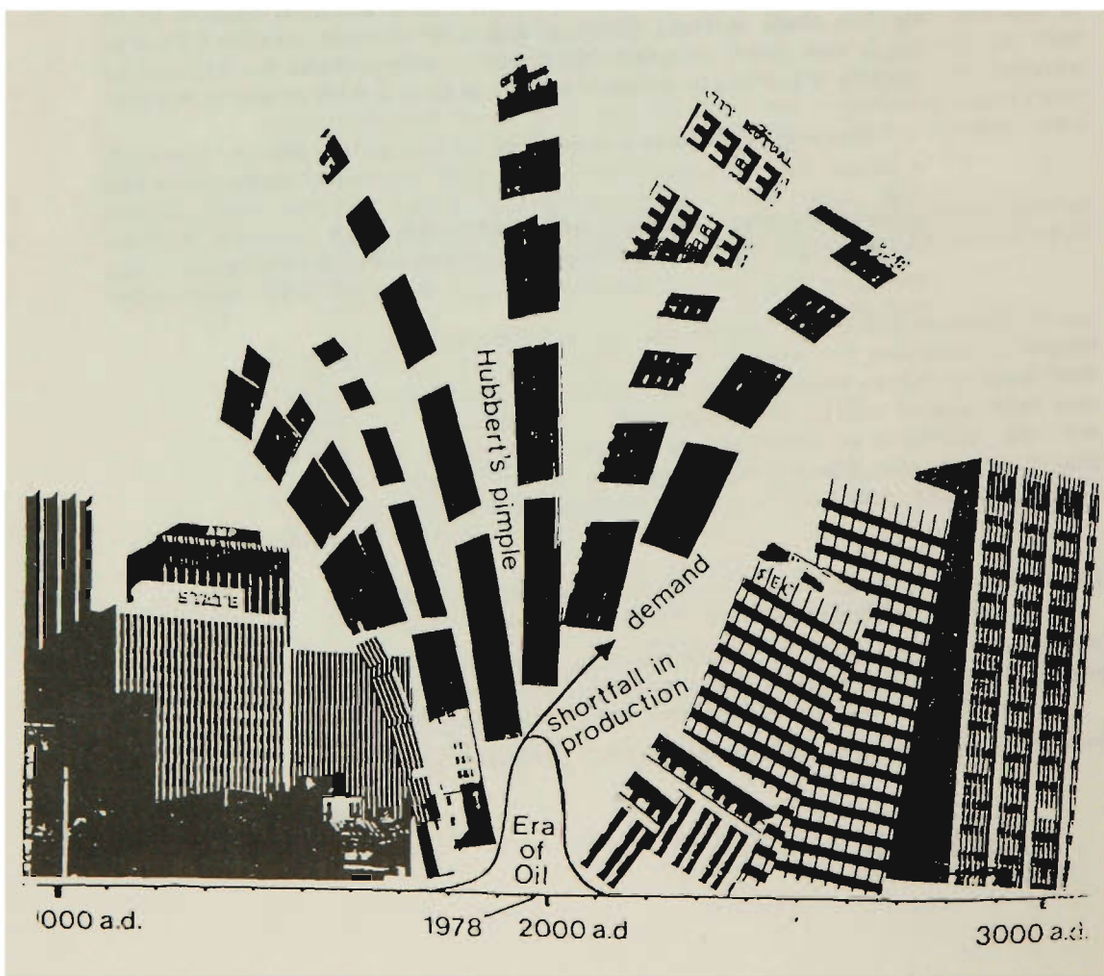
We didn't know most of the other householders before the co-operative began and I can't say we became extremely close friends (although two lovers discovered each other!). But the co-operative did become the basis of a local alternative lifestyle community. Members of the co-operative discovered there were ten other households (about forty to fifty people) with similar lifestyles, ideas and interests in the near vicinity. So from the local co-operative other community groups gained strength. Apart from this, many informal exchanges of ideas on for instance, organic gardening and pushbike maintenance took place during the times when members met. As most of the householders did not have cars, the development of local activities enabled us to become more involved in things generally. Because we didn't have to travel for hours on public transport or worry about the expense of running a car, many interests were now only a walk or bike ride away.

Many groups are less ambitious. In at least one case we know of, a person has for some years bought bulk supplies of staple items like rice, sugar, flour, cheese and peanut butter and sold them at cost price through an informal network of friends. This approach relies on the good-will and efforts of one person and may, in time, place unfair loads on that person. Nevertheless it is certainly a valuable contribution.

Back cover of "Seeds for Change"

Seeds for Change is a book on the energy crisis and its implications for Victoria and Australia. But it is also about people and lifestyles, government and decision-making, and many other issues that are rarely linked with energy.

Here you will find a probing analysis of the disastrous energy problems towards which official planning is leading our society. But you will also find a detailed plan with which we can creatively confront the energy crisis and build a more convivial low-energy society.



Crow Collection Association
Victoria University of Technology

Living Library Project on History of Children's Services
Funded by the Lance Reichstein Charitable Foundation
Sept. 1991 to May 1992
Booklets Published as Background Material.

1. The History of the Carlton Refuge from 1850s to 1920
   First published 1920

2. Two Articles about Health of Women and Children :-
   "The Neglected Children's Aid Society"
   First published 1911
   and
   "The After Care Home and the District Nurses".
   First published 1925

3. Two Documents about Attitudes to Slums
   "Slum Babies and Slum Mothers"
   First published about 1914
   and
   "You can't lift every baby out of the slums
   The Slum Abolition Movement in the 1930s

4. History of Children's Services in Melbourne Municipality
   1910 to 1980

5. "Bread and Treacle Diet"
   Extracts from documents of the 1930s.

6. "Mothers must Work To Win"
   Photos and leaflets from the Brunswick Children's Centre, 1943.

7. "The Deprived West/ The Determined West" an extract from a report by Ruth and Maurie Crow, first published 1972.

8. Creating Community in the Neighbourhood - Neigbourhood Houses in the Western Region", transcript of a tape by Meredith Sussex, 1978.

9. History of the Tweddle Baby Hospital, by Kathleen Codogonotto
   First published 1992

10. The past, present and future - Community Development in the Western Region, a report by Louise Glanville, 1992

11. "Magic in the Lives of Children, Participation in the Lives of their Parents" report prepared by Christine Carolan and Sheila Byard, 1992.

12. Kit on Federal Funding of Children's Services.

About the Project

The Lance Reichstein Charitable Foundation funded the Crow Collection for a Living Library Project on children's services in the Western Region.

A Project Steering Committee has assisted the project worker (Christine Carolan) who has worked with providers of children's services teachers and students in the Region.

The project resulted in the production of a video which includes information on the history of child care, a kit about the way children's services are funded, a series of booklets describing community movements which resulted in initiating some of the present children's services and a display of photos of some of the people who have helped to establish these services in Melbourne's Western Region

A seminar on May 22nd 1992 marked the end of this project but the video and publications can be used well into the future.

About the Collection

Ruth Crow and her late husband, Maurie were involved in movements on urban issues from the mid 1930s. Over the years they built up an extensive collection of documents :- books, pamphlets, posters, photos and working papers.

In 1990 the Victoria University of Technology (Footscray Campus) invited Ruth to donate the collection to the VUT Library.

The Crow Collection includes documents written and/or used by groups and individuals committed to social change. This store of information from the past is being used to generate ideas about the future.

A Crow Collection Association has been formed and incorporated. One of its aims is to enhance the comprehensiveness and accessibility of the Collection throiughg Living library Projects.

The Crow Collection

For more information, contact

Crow Collection Association
Urban Studies Unit
Victoria University of Technology (Footscray)
PO Box 14428 MMC,
Melbourne 3000
Phone: (03) 688 4754, Fax: (03) 688 4805

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This kit has been funded by the Lance Reichstein Charitable Foundation