

Intro:

Healthabitat ←

Paul Pholeros, Stephan Rainow and Paul Torzillo

This exemplary formation promotes the health of indigenous Australians through safe housing and good design.

Thoracic physician Paul Torzillo, anthropologist Stephan Rainow and architect Paul Pholeros founded Healthabitat in 1985 to improve the health of indigenous Australians.

Healthabitat's programme aims to enhance living environments for Indigenous communities, and ensure access to safe housing with functioning electrical and water supplies.

The not-for-profit organisation's model has been so successful it now works in areas as diverse as Nepal and Brooklyn.

Local Indigenous people make up more than 75 per cent of all Australian project staff. To date, 184 Healthabitat projects have been carried out throughout Australia, with more than 7,300 houses improved.

[Venice Architecture Biennale Co-Creative Director Gerard Reinmuth said Healthabitat was selected for inclusion in this year's exhibition because of the innovative nature of their 'formation', and the impact of this on the lives of those who don't commission architecture, some 95 per cent of the world's citizens.](#)

["The Healthabitat formation is based around a unique combination of architect, doctor and environmental health expert, and includes a range of other skills, including statisticians and IT," he said. "One of the most important parts of the formation is the workers, who come from the affected communities and are trained up so they are helping their own people."](#)

[Healthabitat will be represented within the Australian Pavilion by a range of audio visual and graphic material that ask visitors to consider the relation between housing quality and hardware and health. In doing so, the solutions implemented by Healthabitat and the benefits of these become apparent. In addition, they'll wire the Australian and adjacent pavilions with sensors so that visitors can understand the measurement process underpinning their housing transformation projects. Outside the pavilion, they anticipate working on some houses in Venice before the exhibition to show how their process can be applied in any context.](#)

Body Copy:

Singing the praises of an unsung hero

In late 2010 Sydneysider Paul Pholeros – award-winning architect, AM recipient, humanitarian, educator, one of three founders of national indigenous housing organisation Healthabitat, and all round good guy – was publicly feted, again, as an Australian 'hero'. This time the moniker came courtesy of a newly published book profiling unsung heroes of the bush. The author wasn't the first to use the label, and doubtful the last.

As he had on previous occasions, Paul agreed to be included on one condition. That the story profile work being undertaken by the team at Healthabitat, not himself, with Indigenous community members getting equal airtime. In that way, he might shed light on Indigenous health and housing issues Healthabitat had grappled with for 27 years.

The not-for-profit came about in 1985, when Pholeros, anthropologist Stephan Rainow and Dr Paul Torzillo were "thrown together" by a central Australian indigenous health service initiative to improve the health of children aged five years and under. The bond established then in the remote Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands, in north-western South Australia, has since taken them to Indigenous housing and health projects as far flung as Nepal, Thailand, India, New York, and Alaska.

This original article was prepared by a journalist for Australia Unlimited in May 2012

The edits below were made by Australia Unlimited and suggested as changes to the original article. HH was contacted about the changes and noted that the edits removed events relevant to the work.

Almost as diverse, is the trio's background and areas of expertise. Dr Torzillo AM is a medical doctor and thoracic physician, medical director of Healthabitat, a professor at the University of Sydney, and Medical Director of the Aboriginal-controlled Nganampa Health Council in north-west South Australia. [Rainow](#) trained as an anthropologist and then in the area of environmental health, and is Healthabitat's community director – playing a key role in linking health principles and architectural work to the broader living environment and people living in each project community. [Pholeros](#) is an architect, with a private architectural practice separate to the team. His role within the group is to coordinate the range of environmental improvements to improve health. He is also a director of Emergency Architects Australia, Adjunct Professor of Architecture at the University of Sydney, and architectural and managing director of Healthabitat.

Paul says the directive for the trio's first meeting was direct: to stop people getting sick. Healthabitat's Housing for Health principles and methods – for which they've received numerous national and international awards – arose slowly from this "simple but profound one line brief".

Their Housing for Health program was developed specifically to improve the health of people, particularly young children, by ensuring they had access to safe and well functioning housing, and an improved living environment. It was based on safety and nine 'healthy living practices' – all revolving around functioning "health hardware" needed in a house to allow healthy living.

Paul describes health hardware as the obvious physical equipment needed to give people access to the "health giving" services of housing. "To wash a young child the health hardware needed may include a water supply, pumps, tanks, pipes, valves, taps, hot water system, tub and drainage pipes."

"In more than 7,000 homes improved since 1999, only 35 per cent had a working shower when our projects arrived."

Not surprisingly, he says the organisation doesn't employ "an approach to architecture", rather using the skills and methods of architecture to improve the health and well-being of people by improving their living environment.

When considering what materials to use for a project, they consider improved function, the reduced need for maintenance and the local environmental conditions – factors such as the mineral salts present in bore water across non-coastal Australia, which has a major impact on all plumbing fittings and fixtures. When considering design, they start with the health issue that needs to be improved, and then assemble a range of design skills and people to solve those particular problems from many directions – often simultaneously.

"For example, as washing children has the greatest impact on a number of infectious diseases, first we will assemble and train local [Indigenous](#) teams to test all the washing facilities in existing houses, learn how to fix some parts of the systems and how to report more complex faults. Licenced trades then complete more major repair work.

"What is learnt during the fixing will then become the design briefing material for: industrial designers to improve taps and shower roses; a physicist to improve the performance of hot water systems; architects to design a better show area that requires less maintenance and can be produced more cheaply; and, a builder to prefabricate a shower laundry and toilet units to improve quality and reduce the cost of construction in remote areas."

The organisation's approach and success has seen it win most recently the 2011 United Nations World Habitat Award from a field of 250 finalists. This came on top of the 2008 International Union of Architects award for the alleviation of poverty, and a slew of national awards. Government research suggests the real winners are [Indigenous](#) peoples in Australia and offshore who've worked with the team.

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"In Australia, the NSW Health Department evaluated 10 years of Housing for Health projects completed around the State. The results of this independent study showed a 40 per cent reduction in a range of severe infectious illnesses, measured by hospital separations, for Indigenous people living in the houses improved by the Housing for Health program compared to those that had no environmental improvement."

What does the future hold? Paul says Healthabitat will continue working in Australia for any group of people that need a better living environment, and are expanding the same work overseas.

"After completing 184 projects around urban, rural and remote Australia and having also worked on sanitation projects in three Nepal villages and in urban public housing in Brooklyn in New York City, we now believe the principles and methods developed through the Housing for Health program are easily translated into vastly different contexts," he says. "The similarities are the illnesses causing damage to people and poverty. Skin colour, culture, environment and national wealth all vary but the core issue, the well-being of people, remains constant."

"The response internationally to the work after winning the World Habitat Award in 2011 confirms our view that the methods and principles developed in the work are internationally applicable. It will be the solutions that will change to suit each specific place and local community."

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