



60 seconds with... Chris Robinson

Kate Stapleton MPIA

Chris Robinson is one half of the dynamic duo along with Amy Hubbard that started Capire in 2007 – a preeminent stakeholder and community engagement consultancy. But before this, with his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in urban planning, urban design and science from RMIT, Melbourne and Oxford Brookes Universities, Chris worked at the City of St Kilda, the Upper Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges Authority, and GHD in planning and sustainability consulting. Today Chris is Chair at Capire and spends some of his spare time as a self-proclaimed ‘ordinary surfer’, hiker and has established ‘Your Man Time’ (www.yourmantime.com) as a way of encouraging men to invest in their own mental and physical health and wellbeing.



Current role: Co-founder & Chair at Capire www.capire.com.au

What was it that originally attracted you to study urban planning?

It was originally architecture that drew me to RMIT, though I never pursued it. There was also a spatial aspect to my early interests – maps, plans, photography and imagining the future seemed to keep my attention – and who doesn’t love a good Melways flip through! I quickly found that the study of ‘planning’ was stimulating as it started to unpack the complex web of place, environment, art, politics, people and economics that all contribute to city making.

Deciding to start your own consultancy is a big step – how did you know that the time was right for you to take this opportunity?

In early 2007, I was General Manager for the Lend Lease founded Hornery Institute in the Melbourne office, working with Amy. We were building the practice and growing an interesting client list. Without warning, the Melbourne office was suddenly closed. What to do? Within a day or so, we had a business name, some foundation clients and there started our fabulous 15-year plus Capire adventure. It was thrilling and frightening all at once. Being a business owner was always part of my plan – but sometimes in life, we need a jolt to get going (and being unemployed was mine.)

It was recently suggested to me that communities should be paid for their time during consultations and engagement activities. That they are experts on their community and should be remunerated appropriately, like other experts. Do you agree?

This is an interesting one. There are times when community members are invited to participate in programs of engagement over multiple days or sometimes months. In these circumstances, the reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses, or in appreciation of their time and effort is appropriate. The same applies to engagement with representative or Traditional Owner groups who are frequently approached for views on everything – they are frequently overwhelmed with requests and do not have the

resources or time to respond to them all. Payments to assist with resources are suitable.

However, I would be concerned that by building a culture of *cash for comment*, participants may increasingly self-select based on the prospect of payment, and not their genuine contributions. In effect, this public engagement may become more of a recruited paid focus group participant.

I believe it is the responsibility of planners, project sponsors and engagement practitioners to build and invest in engagement processes that reduce barriers to participation. We need to make the engagement ‘pull’ factors so compelling, that community experts willingly contribute, knowing that their insights make a difference, and they have the genuine opportunity to share their insights with others.

What is the best (or one of the best) pieces of advice anyone has given you in your career?

In the early days I was advised to take on the tough projects for they will shape and test you – and try and find joy in the simplest of tasks, for there will be many of those in your life. Turns out, yes there have been very many tough projects and they’ve all made the person I am today. And it is also quite satisfying doing data entry on that spreadsheet that works perfectly, right?

Who do you find inspiring and why?

There are inspiring stories and people everywhere. I have benefited from white, male middle class privilege. In global terms, my path so far has not been terribly difficult, painful or frankly, very interesting. However, I am inspired by people of all ages and from all walks of life who have overcome personal or family trauma, migrated, relocated, rebuilt, or reinvented themselves to build a better future for their community, our society or nature. It is the people who turn up every day, get busy and productive, often against the odds, that inspire me to always try a little harder to make a positive impact.

If you could give 18-year-old self advice now – what would it be?

Robbo, make sure every mistake you make builds you stronger, and if you listen more and talk less, you’ll go further.

60 seconds with... is a regular Planning News Column by Kate Stapleton that interviews people who have previously worked in or studied planning in Victoria but are now doing something new. Kate is Director, Planning and Heritage Practice at the Department of Transport and is also studying Cities at the London School of Economics and Political Science. For interview suggestions or feedback, please email kate.stapleton@roads.vic.gov.au

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