



SHELTER

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Margot Currey

Date: 21 February 2011

Place: Erskineville

Interviewer: Margo Beasley

Recorder: Marantz PMD 620

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **MB:** This is an interview with Margot Currey. It's taking place at her home in Erskineville in Sydney. My name's Margo Beasley. The date is the 21st of February 2011 and the project is the City of Sydney's Shelter Oral History Project which is being conducted on behalf of the City of Sydney's History Programme.

Margot, would you mind telling me where and when you were born?

MC: I was born in Sydney and it was _____ 1937.

MB: Now, we're here today to talk about your current living arrangements, which is that you are part of a collective which is called Emoh Ruo, which is in the suburb of Erskineville in Sydney's inner west. But I wondered if we could talk first about other places where you've lived and on a previous occasion you told me that the nicest place you ever lived, the nicest house in which you ever lived was in Papua New Guinea. Is that right?

MC: Well, I wouldn't say it was the nicest house but it was quite an amazing dwelling. Yes, it was in a place called Aitape which is on the Sepak; it's on the coast, the Sepak Coast and it's an outstation, a small place, and it was in the '60s. And I suppose one of the reasons why it was a lovely little place to be, it was local material and it had very few of the restrictions that a suburban house that we're used to has. The walls were just woven sago palm and the floor was like a black palm floor that had holes and if you swept the dirt you just swept it, you know, down in amongst it. It was not a place that you had to be terribly domestic about and that really suited me down to the ground.

2.02 And the walls just slid open to the beach; I mean, it was just beautiful and I suppose – I mean, the facilities, there was no power, so we had lamps and a kerosene fridge and all the cooking was on a fuel stove and there was no running water, things like that. So we pumped water into a kerosene – you know, a forty four gallon drum on a stand to get hot water, things like that. But, I mean, I suppose when you're only in your twenties it's easy to do that sort of thing. I don't know how I'd feel about it now - the little house is not there any longer - but having children there was quite an interesting experience as well and I'm sure that there are a lot of people that just wouldn't even want to think of doing it but I thoroughly enjoyed it and it was a huge adventure too. I mean let's face it, you don't very often get the chance to live right on a beach and, you know, on your own terms, really; it was quite wonderful.

MB: And you went there because of your husband's work, I believe.

MC: Oh, yes. He was because of him that we moved around. I mean, I was having the children. I hadn't had a further education at that point and so the whole time we were in New Guinea it was his job and it would be slightly different now, wouldn't it? People go everywhere because of women having jobs as well or having a highly qualified job to go to but it was not the case for me. But I was an artist but the requirements of living in that environment in the way that we did, that really took up the time that you had.

4.14 I mean, you were constantly looking after the family because of the lack of facilities, I suppose, but it was not something that we dwelt on because we just had some wonderful experiences and you build up some great relationships, which we did; we've still got those friends.

MB: So that house then must have been very different to the kinds of places that you grew up in.

MC: Oh, my goodness, yes.

MB: So what kinds of places did you grow up in?

MC: I just grew up in, you know, the average – well, no, it wasn't average, really, because I was brought up by my father and my grandmother because my mother died when I was very small, when I was about eighteen months old or something like that. And so I was brought up in a way that was a difficult thing for my father to commit to buying a house; he never did do and so we lived in - I suppose for the time that I remember most was with my grandmother; she came out from England to look after me – and so we lived in a flat in Mosman Bay there. That was before it was an exclusive place to be because - I mean, goodness me, it's an extraordinary place now to be; you couldn't afford to be there, I don't think - but I had a great time growing up there, around the rocks and the water and all that sort of stuff but I think probably, yes, could be that my background didn't tend to sort of encourage me to want to be a suburban, domestic housewife which I never have been and never wanted to be but a bit - - -

5.59 MB: **Yes. When we spoke earlier you attributed your interest in living in a cooperative situation of some kind to not wanting to be domestic, not wanting - - -**

MC: Yes.

MB: **- - - not wanting a conventional house and not wanting to own a house, is that right?**

MC: Oh, yes, I never was on something – I didn't want the responsibility of that in a way, it was something I thought "Oh, no, I don't" – no, it was never something that was urgent for me. For some people it's a driving force. I've seen it and I just think "No, I don't have that drive" but it was the idea of how you did that was something that probably – living in New Guinea the way we did – we lived on the edge of a village so the village life and the village people were – I mean, I didn't sort of get involved in their lives, I wasn't sort of – it just was there, that was your daily life, it was around these people. And you get a totally different view, I think, of the idea of possessing and keeping something and no one else having anything much to do with it is something that you didn't, I just didn't know about and my husband was always one for, what he had everyone else, you know, shared.

MB: **What kind of work did he do, just briefly?**

MC: He was doing engineering work and it was building bridges, roads, airports, things like that.

MB: **So you were in New Guinea for a number of years.**

MC: Yes, yes.

MB: **And then where did you go?**

MC: We came back to – we had to think a bit about that because - we left mainly because I think independence was coming up and we thought that at some point, because my husband had been in the islands, in Vanuatu before, and we had seen the children who had to come back to Australia have a little bit of difficulties socialising or becoming part of the community again and so we actually - - -

8.22 MB: **You mean Australian children who were in Vanuatu or whatever?**

MC: Yes, yes, and in New Guinea, they had trouble coming back and assimilating, and so we didn't really want that to happen and we didn't know what position we'd be in if we stayed there. My husband would have loved to have just stayed in the islands forever and ever and ever. I mean, but I just sort of felt "No", I really had to think about that and so coming back was quite a difficult thing because we didn't want to come back to Sydney - well, it was just that it was going to be such a change for use. So we started off up in Cairns, we just came back to Cairns, and we lived there for a few years but – I don't know, this might sound really strange – Bjelke-Petersen was the Premier there and we were always very interested in politics and what was happening with politics and it would have been a dreadful place to have brought up children, our children; we just didn't want to be brought up in Bjelke-Petersen land. And so that did push us out of there and then we came further down the coast and thought "Well" - we ended up on the Central Coast in actual fact because strangely enough the Old Sydney Town – do you remember Old Sydney Town?

MB: **Yes, I do.**

9.59 MC: Yes. Well, they were rigging a boat like one of the early boats and they wanted it rigged traditionally and my husband was able to do that and so we went up there for him to do that – isn't it a strange sort of thing? And I can remember being quite anxious about this business of not wanting to be caught up sort of – I thought "No, no, I don't want to get caught up as a suburban housewife" and I said "All I want to do is have a little shack on the beach or something. I don't know, I don't want to be in suburbia" and we ended up in a gorgeous place, an old – it was an old fishing – the people from Gosford in the early days used to come out to Macmasters and along Kincumber Creek to Macmasters to these fishing little houses they had. I mean, it had two, three bedrooms but it was only just a small little place; it was just wonderful, we had a wonderful time.

MB: **So you were actually on Macmasters Beach were you?**

MC: We were on the sand dunes at the end of Tudibaring. You've got Copacabana, Tudibaring and then on the other side you've got Macmasters. It was called Macmasters but it was just before the headland of Macmasters and not many people actually lived there

then, there were very few people so everybody knew everybody and we've still got friends from being there. But we had a wonderful life there: we were just on the top of the sand dunes, the kids had the beach and then a lake and, oh, it was just an amazing place to be. And I don't know how I got lucky with that, it was just amazing; it suited us down to the ground.

11.55 But then things started to – the girls were growing up and, you know, they didn't need me so much and we gradually came back to Sydney. We came back to Sydney for me to go to what was then – Gough Whitlam brought in the colleges of advanced education and education for older people – well, for mature aged students - - -

MB: Mature age.

MC: - - - I was only in my thirties. And so we came back for me to do that, for the girls to get a more rounded view, really, of what our society was, because living as we'd lived at Macmasters for instance, it was a very white Anglo-Saxon Protestant sort of area and that was not Australia, it wasn't what was happening. And I mean this is just before Neville Wran came into government and I think he changed a lot of things about how we looked at ourselves and Whitlam as well; a lot of things changed at that time and I'm really glad we came to Sydney at that time because we had a lot of interesting political things. You know, it was a really exciting time for us all and I was able to get my, you know, degree and the children had access to a whole range of things that they didn't – and people, people, they were seeing people; even though they were brought up in New Guinea for quite a few years they were still seeing a range of people and types of people too, less - - -

MB: Where were you living?

MC: - - - Rozelle – less affluent people. It was more educational.

MB: And Rozelle is - - -

MC: Well, then it was - - -

MB: - - - it's an inner western suburb of Sydney - - -

MC: It was then.

14.00 **MB: - - - and at that stage probably still relatively working class.**

MC: Very much so. Very, very different from what it is now. And once again had a wonderful time, the kids had a great time there. And then we moved around that area because we were only renting and we moved a couple of times in that area and then basically moved over here.

MB: By “here” you mean Erskineville?

MC: Erskineville; have never lived in anywhere else in this area.

MB: And you mean you moved into - - -

MC: Yes, yes.

MB: - - - here into the cooperative?

MC: Yes.

MB: So what I'd like to talk about is how the cooperative came to be because one of the unusual things about this particular one is that it's a purpose-built arrangement. A lot of cooperatives are not purpose-built. They may be blocks of flats that are owned cooperatively - - -

MC: Yes, yes.

MB: - - - but in this case the dwellings were all purpose-built and it took a very long time to get off the ground. Can you just tell me how that idea first started?

MC: Oh, yes. I think that's crucial to the success of our organisation. It was through me being at art school, I met someone who introduced me to an artist run collective and it was Kelly Street Collective. It was functioning well, it had been going for about a year, it was a well organised, functioning organisation and it was registered as an association, so the idea of that kind of organisation was already established there. Then one of the members said that housing [?] minister, Tom Uren [former minister in Whitlam and Hawke federal Labor governments], had put forward this proposal for this project for a low cost government LGCH&P - low cost government and council housing - housing anyway, I'm not sure – and we could become part of that; we just had to apply to be part of that and the idea initially was that we would be given a grant which we paid back as a mortgage and we would own the establishment.

16.29 Unfortunately, what happened was that the government at the time – there was a Liberal government in New South Wales, yes – and also the federal government had changed and they had no precedent for cooperative housing or community housing, there was no precedent, so rather than deal with it they kept putting it aside. You would be given goalposts and you would meet those goals and then they would put it aside and you'd have to meet more and it was very frustrating.

MB: So you're saying, I think, that from a federal point of view there was sympathy for this kind of way of housing people at

relatively low cost but at the state level there was no bureaucratic structure to enable it?

MC: Well, at this time, you see, the federal had changed as well.

MB: By that time it had gone back but the idea for it - - -

MC: Neither of them had any structure.

MB: But the idea for it came out of the Whitlam government.

MC: Tom Uren was housing minister [at various times Uren was Minister for Urban and Regional Development; Territories and Local Government; and Local Government and Administrative Services. He had a strong interest in low-cost housing].

MB: Yep, O.K.

MC: He was still asking, you know, after we were built and was still asking us if we felt safe, secure and stuff in our housing – great respect for Tom Uren. But it was an incredibly frustrating process.

MB: And when you say “we”, who are you talking about?

17.53 MC: Well, the members from Kelly Street Collective that presented it to us because as artists we were all struggling to find places where we could live and work and I suppose that most of us were not interested in conventional housing, let's face that.

MB: So the origins of this group are all artists?

MC: Kelly Street Collective as a group, yes.

MB: So Kelly Street Collective didn't have a building?

MC: No, we exhibited in an old warehouse down in Ultimo.

MB: And Kelly Street is where?

MC: Kelly Street, Ultimo.

MB: Ultimo, right. So it was an artists' collective - - -

MC: It was.

MB: - - - but it wasn't to do with living in a cooperative association?

MC: No, but the idea was suggested to this group. So the group, people formed this - we started, the cooperative housing group, started with quite a number. It gradually – some people then went off and, you

know, but the core of the group was Kelly Street and people that knew people at Kelly Street. So I think that that, the fact that – and some of those people had all been at art school together - I hadn't been at art school with them – they'd been at art school together, some had been to primary school together so we actually had a very strong core of, you know, the idea of what it was that we wanted to do and I think that is what kept us going so, so diligently and so we never let go of the purpose and that was a really long time and a really hard time.

20.02 **MB: Because the Whitlam government first came in in 1972, so how long was it until this building was actually built and occupied?**

MC: We've been here fifteen years.

MB: Fifteen years now and we're talking about - - -

MC: Yes. And we started about '84.

MB: Started?

MC: We started the process, the original process in about '84.

MB: Right. So the ideas had been in train for some time before that?

MC: I don't know about that.

MB: I see, right.

MC: Emmalina introduced us to it.

MB: Who is Emmalina?

MC: Sorry, she was the person from the Kelly Street Collective who knew about this. She was far more aware of political things than most of us, you know, the political machinations of various parties and things and what was coming, so she would know the answer to that. But I don't know if Whitlam – I don't know when Tom Uren as the housing minister and whether it was at the end of the time they were in or when it was because we were one of the first and, yes, there are a group of us that were the first group to do this.

MB: And were they all different kinds of people?

MC: Oh, absolutely. You mean in ours or in others?

MB: No, in yours.

MC: Oh, oh.

MB: What kinds of people? You said there were mainly artists.

MC: Oh, that was the thing that drew us all together. We had single males, single females, couples, couples with children, single mothers with children, we had a range.

MB: And yourselves, a family?

MC: No, it was just my husband and I, where the kids had gone by then.

MB: They'd grown up by that stage?

21.49 MC: Mine were gone, yes. But that's changed because children have left home now and we've had to change within that: some people have taken partners outside of the co-op and brought them in and some people have separated from their partners and children have been born here - there were other children that were not born here that were part of the original group - so it's all been sort of - but we're very family oriented, yes.

MB: So if we go back to the trials and tribulations you had about actually getting the whole process going, this is long before you actually had an architect to draw up plans - - -

MC: Yes

MB: - - - can you tell me a bit about that?

MC: Oh, well, it was just a matter of we had to get incorporated but there would be these guidelines which you would meet - they just kept moving the goalposts. We actually sourced the land, we met with the architects and did all that with the architects but what we actually did, we did some actually quite political things in a way. A group had to go to, a group representing the cooperatives and we were one of the co-ops had to actually go to the ombudsman and complain about the Department of Housing of that time because they were not moving and we weren't getting any satisfactory correspondence. We were meeting their needs and the then minister, federal minister, I think he was moved sideways, a new person was brought into the Department of Housing, and then two of us from here - because once again we had sourced the land and we were not being given any approval to get it and the Mayor of South Sydney was very keen for us to have the land.

24.06 **MB: Who was that?**

MC: Vic, Vic Smith, who's since passed away. And we then, two of us, went to see Sandra Nori who was the member for Marrickville, I think - or anyway she represented us. It was that strange time when South

Sydney, Sydney and then it came back to South Sydney, it was just at that - - -

MB: The council boundaries were changing, yes.

MC: - - - yes, that was just a very strange little mix of time, so we went to see her in parliament and we were all organised. Anyway, she was quite amazing; she saw us and we said what we want – oh, no, I know what she did. We walked in and we said who we were and she said “Now, I know what you do”, you know, “I know who you are”, she said “What can I do for you?” and we didn’t have to explain anything about it, we just said what was happening. And I can’t remember the exact sequence of events; it wasn’t long after that that we got the land, that was approved because we then started meeting with our architects who came to where we lived to see what we wanted, what we needed.

MB: I just wanted to ask - - -

MC: Yes.

MB: - - - when you say you “got the land”, what was the financial process? The Department of Housing provided the money?

MC: Yes, yes, they provided money. We sourced the land and they provided the money to buy the land.

MB: And so the arrangement is that the Department of Housing technically owns the land and the building - - -

MC: Yes.

MB: - - - and you pay rent at a capped level – is that how it works?

MC: What, now?

MB: Yes, once you move in.

MC: No, we have a company - - -

26.02 **MB: O.K.**

MC: - - - which has only just been organised.

MB: This is recent?

MC: This is recent.

MB: But what was it prior to that time?

MC: Oh, yes.

MB: Under what arrangement did you come in?

MC: Yes, the same – they still had no structure, formal structure for us so they were treating our way of paying rent the same as public housing. So their whole idea of it being a grant or a loan – a grant and a loan, I think, I'm not too sure even now. But we worked really hard at that time and the two of us had actually gone to St George, we spoke to them at St George and they were prepared to help us with the whole method of payment but they could not get the government to go guarantor so that all fell through but that's water under the bridge, really.

MB: No, it's just interesting to know what the legal process and financial process was, the structure under which it came about.

MC: Yes.

MB: So the structure under which it came about was effectively like public housing - - -

MC: M'mm.

MB: - - - except in this case you were a group of people who were choosing who your near neighbours were going to be?

MC: Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes.

MB: And you were also highly influential on the kind of building that you were going to live in.

MC: At that time, yes, yes, yes, yes, we were.

MB: Yes.

MC: And we also wear two hats: we're tenant managers; we do all our own maintenance. We now have a different structure where we have the company which formed to – because registration of housing providers has become very strict and it was quite a difficult thing for cooperatives to keep up the standard.

28.00 We are an A standard but that was getting harder – it's getting harder and harder. And so this company is formed to – actually, it will probably – well, no, it won't probably, it will most certainly ensure that the sector will remain intact and grow because there's all those sorts of aspects coming to it: you know, is it going to be a growing sector? So there are a whole range of things which really and truly is very difficult for a volunteer group of people who are maintaining their own establishments and doing their own accounting and all those sorts of

things to take all that on board because who's going to do that? I mean, it's really hard. So we've got a company now, we've formed a company.

MB: But when you were first organising to get the building built - I should make the point here is that we talk about cooperative but you don't all live in the same dwelling, it's many dwellings, everybody has in effect a private dwelling, even if they don't privately own it.

MC: Mm, mm.

MB: But you each have your own dwelling which in this case it's a series of apartments overlooking a central garden.

MC: Yes.

MB: Can you tell me what sorts of things you thought about when you were working with the architect about how you would want these dwellings to be designed – what were the priorities?

MC: Oh, it'd be different for different people.

MB: Yes.

MC: And for us it was we wanted to have an extra bedroom for grandchildren or for - - -

MB: By an “extra bedroom” you mean – so you wanted - - -

MC: Two bedrooms.

MB: - - - a two bedroom flat, yes.

29.54 **MC:** Because we had always had people living with us as family and so it was not going to be a situation where suddenly no one is ever going to come again. So, you know, we really did ask for that and so we got that but apart from that I just said “open plan” because it had always been a problem for us where if you lived in a place that had only sort of a loungeroom and a small dining room or something like that the number of people that would sort of congregate was always a difficult thing but here we can have so many people. We've had fourteen people sleep here, family.

MB: Well, it's a very large living area, isn't it, plus you've got two bedrooms - - -

MC: Well, yes, yes.

MB: - - - and a spacious balcony at the back.

MC: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

MB: So are all the apartments or flats in the co-op, are they all fairly similar to this, are they all fairly open plan?

MC: I don't know.

MB: You don't know.

MC: Oh, no, hang on, no, that's just silly for me to say that. Some people wanted bedrooms and separate things because of families, I mean everyone was able to – so the configurations downstairs for instance, there's a wall here, (indicates visually) there's a wall goes there, so there is a room there and a room there (indicates visually).

MB: I see, so you're gesturing to meaning a wall down part of your living area - - -

MC: Well, yes, yes.

MB: - - - so that would then be divided into two separate rooms.

MC: Yes. And then it sort of stops about somewhere here (indicates visually) and there's an eating area that's separate from two rooms there (indicates visually). Over the other side there it's mainly that one would image that one (indicates visually), I think. And then, yes, no, they are different, they're all different.

MB: So people have had a pretty clear idea, people in the collective had a pretty clear idea which dwelling would be theirs and then could have - - -

MC: Oh, yes.

MB: - - - a significant influence over - - -

MC: Oh, yes.

MB: - - - how the internals of it were designed?

32.00 MC: I didn't have that much interest in this at the time because my husband died. He saw it starting, he never saw this building, he never saw this and he never saw how it was going but I didn't have much – I didn't come down very often. He used to come down and see how it was all being – you know, meet the dozer driver and all those sorts of things, he used to come down all the time for that but I lost – after he died I just sort of didn't have much to do with it. And the girls used to – when it was at a stage where you could come the girls said “You've got to go down and have a look”. I said “Oh, I don't

care much". Anyway, when I came I just got the surprise of my life. I actually had no idea I had that verandah, I didn't know I had those doors to the verandah and I don't think I knew – oh, there were things that I hadn't even known about because I hadn't but some people were absolutely, you know, involved in the meticulous details of where things would be.

MB: And what about issues of privacy between the dwellings? Were things designed so that they didn't look in on each other or how did that work?

MC: I don't know.

MB: Because they are pretty private, aren't they?

MC: Yes.

MB: You don't overlook each other; they're angled in such a way - - -

MC: I don't know that we even thought about that. I think - - -

MB: Perhaps the architect thought about it.

MC: Well, I know he's got this angle here (indicates visually) for us.

MB: On your wall, yes.

MC: Well, there's that odd sort of angle there and there (indicates visually)
- - -

MB: Yes.

MC: - - - so that we face that way (indicates visually) rather than that way (indicates visually).

MB: What's the significance of that?

MC: It's northeast.

MB: Uh-huh.

MC: Yes, yes, yes, it's a better direction to face. There were things like that but as far as overlooking each other that wasn't something we thought about, I don't think. Sometimes people come here and think "Oh, you know, privacy" but really I mean we all just know each other so well.

34.13 **MB: Well, and it's not very different to another block of apartments, really.**

MC: No, except we are more – I mean we'll walk in and out of each other's places quite easily.

MB: And you have known each other over a very long time?

MC: Yes, exactly.

MB: So I guess also it was anticipated, because people had so much influence over the design of their individual dwelling it was anticipated that people were going to be more or less permanent?

MC: In a way I'm not sure that that – we had a bit of a – yes, it's not – you sort of got a feeling that in the Department because they formed a department within the Department of Housing which was ministering us and we had difficulty communicating and you just got the feeling that we were not supposed to consider this as a permanent sort of situation and it was our liaison body at the time, ARCH [Advocates for real Community Housing], was always saying that "These are their homes and this is home" and we as a group, because of family and our makeup it's more likely to be permanent than a co-op that just has single people who share, which is the case for quite a few and they will change 'round. And some co-ops have vacancies all the time.

MB: I see, so they might have single people all sharing one dwelling – is that what you mean?

35.56 MC: Well, not one dwelling but they will have two or three people in one unit that you share. A lot of the co-op – not a lot, I suppose, but quite a few of the co-ops are share spaces and this was supposed to be but it was we shared in a different way, I suppose, you know, we share with family and stuff like that.

MB: But you each have your own dwelling?

MC: Yes, we do, we do, yeah, and we've made sure that we've respected that within each other, you know, within that whole sort of process because there was a lot of pressure to bring in people to share.

MB: I'm sorry, what do you mean by that?

MC: To bring – oh, well, for a two bedroom place - for instance when my husband died I'm a single person in a two bedroom place and that as far as the Department is concerned you're not supposed to be doing that and so there's pressure on you but we applied for me to have it because I had the family and the concept of me having someone come and live, it was just ridiculous; I mean, it's just a stupid way of looking at people's lives; I mean, how could you think that? And so I'm a very strong advocate for people, you know, people having a decent sort of lifestyle, you know, being able to live a decent life

without the pressure of maybe having some strange person that they don't know come in and live with them – that's not on.

MB: So I think what you are saying there a bit is that you are still under threat in some ways or feel as though you might be that in some way the Department of Housing felt as though - - -

MC: Oh, this was previously, this is a long time ago now.

MB: This is before you became a company?

37.57 MC: No, this was we established for ourselves our way of dealing with – no, there was no way that we were going to do anything like that, so we just applied for people to live as they – you know, if someone, their partner, say for instance their partner left that person is in a state of grieving to a degree, whatever the circumstances, so we have just applied for that person to live in that place and we have all the documentation to do that and we do all those things properly. We're very aware of how to do these things properly and usually if you do you find that it just goes through the channels, the right channels, you don't come across the barriers that you would if you start to get aggressive about; you just go through the right channels and you usually find that, you know, with an administrative sort of bureaucratic body like the Department of Housing you find that it has its passage and it goes through very well because I don't think people actually want trouble about those things.

MB: So tell me about the other people who live here. You don't have to tell me their names but just what kinds of people are living here – are there young families or -?

MC: We've got a mixture, we've got a mixture. With some of the younger ones taking partners, that's created a nice healthy new dynamic – this has been over, you know, say the last ten years. And then an older – I mean in the time they've been here – and a founding member taking a partner, having a child, that's a great dynamic and then children leaving home and grandchildren coming in, visiting and creating another dynamic, that's really good.

40.21 I think the ones that are getting older, I think because we have all been together for so long we're very aware of when we need to just respect the fact that someone might need a bit of a break from responsibility and we also share information about how to maintain your health and maintain – we share information about activities that we can do and all those things, I think, actually help to keep people, you know, help to keep people lively rather than people thinking "Oh, you know", they sit back and do nothing, they're actually not given an opportunity to do that.

MB: So it's a supportive community?

MC: Very, very much so.

MB: And are there regular meetings, how does it work?

MC: Oh, we have to have meetings - - -

MB: Yes.

MC: - - - as a registered cooperative, that's separate from anything else; it is our relationship with the Registry of Cooperatives is any cooperative has to do that and then you have rules that you must abide by with them and we have to inform them, you know, comply with the rules and within that there are meetings, you must have meetings and also, you know, your financial situation has to be evident and recorded.

42.09 We have meetings once a month – we've got one tonight and we've actually invited our field officer from the company to come and talk to us about a few issues that we want to clarify. We have meetings once a month and we're one of those establishments – and I don't know whether there are any other co-ops like it or not, I'm not too sure – where we don't have a board; we have directors but we don't have a board that makes decisions, it's a consensus. So we meet and make all our decisions at our monthly meeting and it's all, you know, officially "That's a business thing", we're very, very aware that we have a business as well as, you know, the other side of our co-op.

MB: And now that you are a company, how does that work financially - I mean, you all pay rent?

MC: Mm, mm.

MB: And where does that money go to - it doesn't go to Department of Housing?

MC: No, no, it goes to the company. It's for them to – because our rent always never went to the Department of Housing; we paid rent to maintain our buildings and to pay for what we needed within the buildings. Now we pay rent to the company because they have taken responsibility for major maintenance and they will register as an organisation basically on our behalf. We have to be well functioning so that they can register and get registered as a housing provider, whereas we were registering ourselves before and it was just getting too difficult and too bureaucratic for us to manage.

44.08 **MB: So the company is just responsible for this co-op or other co-ops as well?**

MC: Oh, no, no, no, no, for the co-ops of New South Wales.

MB: All of the co-ops of New South Wales.

MC: New South Wales, yes, yes. Other states have got a similar thing. We've had to work out what suits us because we've been going for a long time in a different way from, say, Victoria. I don't know, I can't go into the details of what that is because it's quite complicated but we have been functioning differently but the company is our spokesperson with the government and, you know, we're progressing very quickly towards a more independent organisation, I suppose. It's hard to say, hard to say what it will be but I think that, you know, they're looking at transferring title and things like that, so that's looking very, very positive.

MB: It might be quite positive.

MC: M'mm.

MB: And now just as far as day to day living is concerned here, has there ever been a situation where people here have decided that they don't want a particular person to be living here in the co-op?

MC: Mm, mm.

MB: What happens then, what sort of circumstances might it occur in, that feeling of - - -

MC: Well, one that I can bring to mind – and actually we've had two – but one that I can bring to mind was a situation where two single people were sharing a two bedroom place and they were not related in any way; you know, they weren't partners, they just knew each other vaguely, and it just did not work and it had personality problems and it was extremely destructive.

46.05 And at that time we were – oh, it was very difficult – at that time we were able to use a – now, I actually can't remember. I would have to have a look at the files – this is quite a while ago now.

MB: That's O.K, yes.

MC: And I don't understand, I can't remember what it was that we could use but we could ask that person to leave under a certain clause of the - - -

MB: Under a certain mechanism that was available to you?

MC: Yes, and, yes, it was available.

MB: That's O.K, yes.

MC: And I don't remember what it was but it was extremely unpleasant, extremely difficult and we decided, it helped us to decide never to ask two people who weren't in a relationship of some kind, family or partners or something, to share a place, because it was very destructive, it was very destructive to the general co-op functioning.

MB: Why was that, how did that play out?

MC: Oh, how did it play out? In sort of behaviour and - - -

MB: Bad behaviour?

MC: Oh, well, behaviour that was very different from the kind of behaviour that – we have a strong trust, a relationship of trust here, and it seems to me as if that's an extremely important part of an organisation like this - I just think we're very lucky. And unfortunately this particular person was someone that we just didn't feel that we could trust and if you can't trust people within the – I think it means you have to become more bureaucratic or, yes, there are certain things that you would have to put into place and that is very difficult, I think.

48.08 **MB: That was resolved - - -**

MC: Oh, yes, that was resolved.

MB: - - - through that mechanism?

MC: Yes, yes.

MB: Another thing that struck me is that it's very attractive in here, it's beautiful overlooking the garden, the sort of shared open area that you all share - - -

MC: Mm, mm.

MB: - - - but in effect it's a kind of a gated community. Like there are two ways you can get in from two different streets but both those are locked and there are security panels that you have to buzz in order to be let in, which I suppose, you know, people could think is a bit contradictory with the idea of a co-op.

MC: Mm.

MB: But can you tell me why that would be?

MC: Oh, yes. People would just walk through.

MB: Would they?

MC: The public would just – oh, yes, the public would just walk through. When we first came here I thought “Oh, you know we won’t need” – oh, but people were just walking, you know, just coming up the stairs all the time. People presume, I think, because it’s flats or units or something that it’s public space. We’d have had people coming through here all the time and we wanted – at that time there were only small children that have since grown, we wanted them to have a place they could play and we also didn’t want to feel that we had to lock everything; we just don’t at the moment. Sometimes I do but not all the time and nobody does and we didn’t want to feel that we had to just lock ourselves in. And people would have just walked straight through from here to John Street.

MB: Just using it as a public accessway?

MC: Public access, oh, yes. It was quite incredible – when we first came here there was no gate there (indicates visually) and - - -

MB: Out the back of your place, you mean?

MC: - - - people would just be coming here and “Oh, is the way in to all the units?, you know, “What?” “Oh, O.K, you know”. They didn’t know me and I was absolutely – I thought, “Oh, no, no, can’t do this”, so we put the gate there for that but there was always one down there (indicates visually).

50.09 **MB: On the other side, John Street?**

MC: John Street, yes.

MB: Yes, because it does feel, when you're overlooking the gardens it feels very private and enclosed, it's lovely, and I suppose very safe for children.

MC: The children, yes.

MB: But within it you have a lot of – although outsiders may in effect be locked out, within it there's a lot of personal freedom because - - -

MC: Yes, absolutely.

MB: - - - you feel as though you can leave the place unlocked.

MC: Absolutely, and there are a lot of people, a lot of local people who know people here; we always have lots of people coming and visiting and being down here and, you know, they come to barbeques or whatever's happening you find a lot of people come. Yes, no one has ever sort of been bothered by the gates. Yes, it's an interesting thing,

it's quite an interesting thought but I think that, no, we wouldn't, wouldn't change it, no, not now, no.

MB: Are you aware of housing cooperatives having existed before in New South Wales?

MC: Mm, mm.

MB: What is it that you're aware of?

MC: I think there was an Indigenous one; that's now become a housing association, I think, it didn't join our company. Ningana is an old one but that's registered under – there wasn't a co-op thing for it to register, you know, that wasn't the scheme at the time that they started. No, they've been going for a long time. They're single people.

52.06 **MB: Where are they? Single people.**

MC: They're in Leichhardt, I think or – yes, Leichhardt, yes. And, you know, people do sort of talk about co-ops but then I don't know, I didn't know anything about them existing. You know, I wasn't sort of interested before and, yes.

MB: Your husband was also pretty keen on the idea of living in a co-op.

MC: Oh, yes, yes, absolutely.

MB: So did he have an unconventional upbringing himself?

MC: No, no, he didn't, but he was brought up in Bexley and he was brought up with – there were four brothers but he was an unconventional person. But he went to war at seventeen, just turned eighteen or something and so he spent his youth and I think that affected everybody that did something like that and he spent a lot of his time in the islands and a lot out west New South Wales. And, yes, but he was really keen on this idea and, you know, was anxious to sort of lobby people and see what could be done about that. Because we were also part of, you know, various – when we were in Cairns we were part of a group that started an art gallery there and it was like a cooperative in structure where, you know, you all had working spaces and you produced work for this gallery and those sorts of things were part of our lives.

MB: And you did work for that gallery, I take it?

MC: Oh, yes, we worked well.

MB: And he did too – was your husband an artist too?

53.53 MC: Yes. No, he was not a conventional artist. He was a great knot man, so he used to do knotting projects and things like that, so he was very good with all that sort of stuff.

MB: Knotting projects?

MC: Well, in the first Festival of Sydney he knew – yes, he was the sort of person that people – he knew artists and writers and people like that, he was someone that they all knew, but he was a great knoter and he did this - - -

MB: Do you mean like naval knots and shipping knots?

MC: Yes, yes, all that sort of stuff and he made this suspension bridge when we were in the first Festival of Sydney. And a friend of ours was organising all these artists, craftsmen to do these things and he did this suspension bridge right across Paddy's Market, it was an amazing thing.

MB: Did he?

MC: Yes, it was fantastic.

MB: What was his name, your husband?

MC: Alan.

MB: Alan?

MC: Alan, yes.

MB: Alan Currey?

MC: Alan Currey, yes. And, yes, he did this amazing sort of suspension thing but, yes, he was more the words man, so.

MB: It's interesting to me because what I'm thinking about a bit is that housing cooperatives – I mean, you came in at a time when there was a lot of thought about alternative ways of living in the late '60s and the '70s and so on.

MC: Mm.

MB: A lot of that probably tended to be amongst people who were a bit younger than you – not a lot but a bit - - -

MC: Mm, mm.

MB: - - - but there were also people who weren't necessarily all that young involved with those ideas and the development of those ideas. Sometimes they were involved in those '70s ideas about living in alternative ways, in part because they'd had connections or associations with other ideologies or beliefs in some other way.

MC: Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

MB: Sort of what I'm trying to get at is whether you or Alan had had that or whether it was really just a matter of - - -

MC: No.

MB: - - - the two of you being rather like-minded about these things.

56.03 **MC:** Yes. I think when we were in Cairns there were a few attempts to look at people pooling their resources and doing things but I was concerned about the basic premise on which these things were being established: there just seemed to be a slightly unrealistic ideology behind some of that and so I was not going to commit myself to something like that, to some of those sort of ideas. And when we came down into New South Wales we were going to look at Tuntabale Falls and Nimbin and things like that.

MB: Communes.

MC: Yes, yes.

MB: As opposed to cooperatives?

MC: Oh, yes. And we were looking at some of those and we knew a lot of people that were involved in some of those things.

MB: Did you?

MC: In Cairns we did, yes, for sure. Not so much in New South Wales but there was just something that I didn't – no, neither of us, really but I was more likely to articulate it – something that I just felt “No, I don't quite feel that there's the” – and it could have been the fact that we were a bit older and our experience was broader and I felt “No”. And then when we came down we always had people who lived with us, you know, one person here, one person there; people would say “Can we live with you for a while?” “Oh, yeah, O.K.” and so this was sort of something that we were familiar with but it wasn't really until - I don't know, had been though quite a – after arts school and that sort of discipline and there just seemed to be more structure for me about the co-op.

58.12 **MB:** In doing it this way?

MC: Mm, mm.

MB: Well, it certainly requires a major commitment, doesn't it, on a personal level?

MC: Very much so.

MB: And I imagine in view of the extremely long lead time, before you even managed to get the building started and then getting it finished and so on, all the people who stuck around for that time would have, I suppose, in a way demonstrated that they had a commitment and maturity to that ideal.

MC: Oh, yes, very much so. And they're still – I mean, you know that someone may take their time out for a while for various reasons – it could be all sorts of things – but you know that they know the structure of how it works, what's happened and so you can trust that that person is fine, they're not just dropping out because they don't want to work or anything like that – that's not the case – or they don't want to be part of what's happening or they can't accept the responsibility of what's happening. That's not the case because everybody has got that knowledge of how it's been for us all and you find one person can quote the rules and one can't but knows the basic thing and then someone will do the physical thing here, so you just get to know what everybody's skills are and everybody's got them.

MB: I mean there are all sorts of cooperatives, not just housing cooperatives.

MC: Mm, mm.

59.58 **MB: And when I asked you before about knowing if there were others in New South Wales that preceded you I was really thinking even perhaps pre-war or do you know anything about whether there's a tradition of this kind of thing in any sense in New South Wales?**

MC: There's a tradition of cooperatives generally, oh, yes. Most of the country towns had retail cooperatives, yes, and there was Norco – you know, farmers had cooperatives and I think that they're making a bit of a comeback in some places, aren't they, cooperatives? Yes, so we're only one of a type of cooperative. But another thing I was going to say about – you were talking about the people that are here. I mean, we've been able to watch – because of the fact that we have to do our own administration and consequently have to have committees for the various aspects of what is needed to be done, the way people have grown has just been extraordinary and the opportunity they've had to do certain things. And because there's a security in their accommodation they've been able to get better

education and develop their education and it is really good to see people develop.

MB: Are you saying it's because they've got secure accommodation but it's also at a very reasonable cost and that means then they can stay permanently and make other plans about things in their lives?

MC: Yes, yes. Yes, well, yes, yeah, you could put it that way. The secure housing, in the way that they have control over that, is a very important part of it. I mean, no one is subjected to the fact that someone is going to sell their property or put the rent up to such an extent that it's out of their reach, so there is that security and that has made a huge difference to how everyone has developed and, yes, it's really very interesting.

62.25 **MB: That's a very interesting observation.**

MC: Yes, it is, it's a very interesting thing to have happened and I think, you know, other people could say the same thing, other co-ops that have longstanding people in them.

MB: That's very interesting. And before we started recording today you were telling me you'd just had a big clean-up day yesterday. What's that like?

MC:

MB: I mean, you know, it's hard enough just cleaning out one place.

MC: Well, we don't clean up – our own personal stuff would only be at our own thing but we've got - - -

MB: But what kind of stuff did you have to deal with yesterday? It was a very hot day in Sydney - - -

MC: It was.

MB: - - - not the worst of this summer but nevertheless hot and humid.

MC: Well, we'd hired the truck for this weekend and it was all in everybody's – you know, it was all set at the last meeting, this is it, and so we all knew because it's just extraordinary how people just collect things and put it into common space.

MB: What sorts of things are you talking about?

MC: Oh, old chairs and stuff like that. We threw away all the old couches and the old chairs.

MB: What common space were they in?

MC: Oh, there's the common room.

MB: Yes.

MC: There are storage sheds there, there's like a garage – it's not a garage but it's an entrance down the other side there but it's a long entrance – it's the length of that building – and that was full of bits and pieces, you know, building bits and pieces and things for this and things for the garden.

64.05 Well, actually old prams, old things that people have collected and a lot of stuff had been there for years and years and years and years and years. And we threw away a lot of stuff out of the common room, we threw away stuff out of there, and then we've got a garage here that was storage and there was stuff from my family, from me. Not just me but other people as well and so everybody's gone through it and there's stuff gone out from there that's been in there for fifteen years. And you put it out on the street and a lot of it just goes.

MB: Yes, in about five minutes it's gone, yes.

MC: Gone. And then we had to think of – when the building next door was converted into two units instead of the one for the big family, that was converted into two units - - -

MB: Yes. When you say "the building next door", also part of the co-op, yes.

MC: Oh, yes, yes, just there.

MB: Immediately adjacent to you.

MC: - - - yes, yes, there was so much old building material left down there and it was just awful, really, because we just had to get rid of that. And paint, you see, old half paint tins we've got to find where to get rid of. Gee, I was going to ring up the – yes, I have to ring the council and find out where to get rid of that and so we're generally starting again with couches and furniture for the common room.

MB: What's the common room used for?

MC: Oh, the common room gets used. That's quite an interesting question because it's a big space. You saw it, didn't you?

MB: Yes, I've seen it, yes.

MC: It's a big space. We have our meetings there, we have some social functions there, so we use it like that but then we have two different choirs come and use it at night, we have a group that knits for 'Wrap with Love' that meets there.

66.05 That's mainly us and outside friends but the choirs come from people here knowing them and we have a theatre group practises there. So people in the community, really, is what I'm saying, people from the community contact us - - -

MB: From the local community?

MC: Well, yes.

MB: You don't mean just the co-op but you mean from around about?

MC: Sorry, yes, yes, or people that come through someone else and they may not live near here but they come through one of the member's involvement with the group, maybe, and so it gets used quite regularly and it's a very good general community resource.

MB: Yes, it services the much broader community and not just the immediate - - -

MC: Oh, yes, absolutely. And that is something that we find is very healthy, we like that.

MB: I bet.

MC: Mm.

MB: So what's been the best thing about living here?

MC: Someone said to me yesterday "Oh, the co-op seems a big part of your life". I said "It is my life. I mean, that's just all there is to it". And, for me, if I go away I can come back and I know I'm surrounded by a whole range of different people that I've known for a long time and, you know, I can just pop in and maybe just meet down there and have a drink or go into someone's place and do something; I can just sort of come home and I'm surrounded. And we exchange a lot of information which is supportive and, yes, we inform each other of all these different things that are of interest and we meet other people through each other.

68.01 We find a lot of people, we have friends in common that you don't realise until you all get together. It's just an extremely supportive situation and I'm not sure that every cooperative would be, I don't know, but I think co-ops that I know, the older co-ops which are ones that I know mostly, the main participants are extremely forceful about

their, you know, hanging on to what they've got and, you know, we've had to present a very strong front at quite a few occasions previously.

MB: So there've been perceived threats, you mean, to the - - -

MC: Oh, most certainly.

MB: Can you give me an example of that?

MC: It's hard to say in a way because in many ways we weren't privy to the actual event, it was going more at a political level through our liaison group, but we would be privy to the discussions that seemed to be the idea that our sector was not at all popular because I think we're very difficult to – or we were – it was difficult for the bureaucracy to control in a way and they couldn't put us in that same category or the category that they wanted to put us in because we just wouldn't be put in it and we'd been going for too long to just make major – but we did get, in New South Wales we got for the first time ever a supportive minister. I can't remember what his name was but he's not Minister for Housing now but he was and he - - -

70.11 **MB:** Under which government?

MC: Oh, this present Labor government.

MB: Current Labor government.

MC: Because this is not that long ago. And he said that he thought it was an extremely positive alternative for housing and not just – you see, we don't have – we have a range of incomes. For our income to remain viable for us to do our own maintenance and that sort of thing we are open to people who pay market rent. So we have people who pay market rent, we have people who pay twenty five per cent of their income and that is something that the Department was finding – depending, I suppose, on their philosophy of the time or their ideology, I don't know, and those were political things that we found quite difficult to take on board and it wasn't our part to actually do that but it was most certainly there and they would prefer us to have not been independent from, say, the community housing providers who, you know, have community housing and they have employed supervisors of their housing. But, yes, oh, yes, we have most certainly had to deal with difficulties.

71.59 It's not the sort of thing that I – I suppose I was aware of things, that we were in a very difficult situation but it was very hard for us to know what we could do about it and it was also something – I can remember saying once to someone, "You know, I'm not going to make big issues about this within the co-op" because I actually was quite involved with the liaison body and I was also a peer group - - -

MB: Assessor?

MC: - - - yes, for accreditation, sorry, and so that meant I was seeing quite a bit of what was - - -

MB: Of other co-ops? Is that what you were assessing?

MC: Yes, other co-ops and also I did an association and that was a very interesting experience too. So I was aware that we were in a very difficult position, we as a co-op didn't know what to do. But I said to someone, "You know, look, really you can't impose this on a whole group of people who are not all functioning at the same level as you are with the ARCH group" – or the liaison body or whoever it was – "because people get stressed and that means that you've got a whole group of people living in a state of stress which isn't going to benefit anybody". And so now I think we seem to be far more relaxed and everybody generally seems more relaxed and people, you know, really seem to be enjoying it very much. So that's really good.

74.01 **MB: Well, that's a nice point to end on.**

MC: Yes, it is.

MB: Unless, are there other things you would like to say?

MC: No, no, no, no. I think that, yes, I've talked about this before and so it's really interesting for me. I suppose the last time I talked about it was probably nine years ago and so it's really interesting to see where things are now and I think things at last have got a more positive future for us as a way of people living if they want to, if they want to, yeah.

MB: That's great.

MC: Yes.

MB: Thank you very much for all your time.

Interview ends