

ROBIN ALLISON

# FOR EARTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD



*Robin Allison*

**Robin Allison is the co-founder of *Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood* in Ranui, West Auckland, a 32-home community which incorporates the principles of cohousing, eco-architecture and permaculture. She has been the driving soul behind this \$15 million housing development, which has become an inspiring example of what can be achieved by a group of ordinary New Zealanders working to demonstrate social and environmental sustainability.**

As an architect, Allison has fostered the comprehensive adoption of eco-design features — including energy efficient design, the use of non-toxic materials, eco-technologies and on-site water management. Each household at *Earthsong* has a private, self-contained home, and they also jointly own extensive shared facilities including a large common house, thriving organic gardens, an orchard, pond, and native bush areas.

The *Earthsong* community hosts tours and other educational initiatives to share their practical experience in establishing the eco-neighbourhood, including the consensus social tools which have encouraged the full participation by all members in the development of this community.

- Robin Allison grew up at Bucklands Beach in Auckland, and left home to study at Otago University. She had her first experience of community at the age of 19 years, when she bought a small house and half an acre in the village of Waitati, north of Dunedin. This village had attracted many “alternative lifestylers” who had also bought cheap homes in the area. In the 18 months she lived there, she got involved in a number of cooperative enterprises such as the community garden and food coop, a Spring Festival music event, and helping to produce a national alternative lifestyle magazine called *Mushroom*.

In 1977, Allison left New Zealand to spend three years travelling in Australia, South America and Europe, meeting her future husband on the way. Like many New Zealanders, she worked in London for a year, but on turning 25 she knew she was ready to return home and get serious about a career.

“In my travels I had seen enough to know that humans were causing huge problems for ourselves and the planet, and I knew we could do better. I realised I could live my life as if my actions and choices were of no consequence, or I could learn a skill with which I could really contribute to a more just and sustainable world. Architecture was the field that drew me and seemed to best match my interests ...”

Allison spent the next seven years getting her architecture degree at Auckland University, and having two children along the way. She found that architecture was the perfect left brain/ right brain profession for her ... encompassing both creativity and analysis.

Researching and writing her thesis became another formative experience for Allison — and it shaped what was to become an enduring manifesto of life. The thesis explored the concept of “edge” which, in architectural terms, is usually a wall or a fixed boundary designed as a separation between two states. She believes the “edge” can more fruitfully be seen as the place of connection, as in such transition zones like thresholds, balconies and verandas. She applied this concept to other fields of knowledge, and wove the elements of permaculture, feminism, community, and spirituality into a world view that recognises having a deep sense of connection between people and with nature is intrinsic to sustainability and life.

On leaving her studies, Allison took a full-time job with *Descon*, the design consultancy of the state-run Housing Corporation, which designed plans for innovative and attractive low-cost homes. She designed many single-site or clustered passive solar houses, and homes specifically designed for disabled tenants. And after two-and-a-half years, she took this experience and made the leap to set herself up in practice as an independent architect.

But also at this time, Allison started to realise that something important was missing. She found herself stressed and stretched with a more-than-full-time job, two small children, and an increasing feeling of isolation in her own family life. She found herself yearning for a greater sense of community, and looking back with some fondness at the earlier sense of community she had experienced at Waitati.

“I was browsing in the Women’s Bookshop one day and came across a book called *Cohousing*, written by two American architects. I was completely taken with every aspect of the concept ... it rang all my bells, and there was a big *YES!* inside me. Yes, I want to live this way, and yes, I want my children to grow up in this kind of community. I now had a picture, a concept of what such a community could be ... but I didn’t yet know how to make it happen.”

- In 1992, Allison came across two different initiatives that were to become pivotal in the next steps of her life. The first was an event called *Heart Politics*, a twice yearly gathering of people concerned about social justice and environmental issues, held at the Tauhara Conference and Retreat Centre in Taupo. Allison: “At my first gathering it felt like coming home. Here were all these other people, working in all sorts of different fields but from a similar values base to mine ... and committed to learning to be more effective in championing their values in the world. The friendships, community, support and challenge that *Heart*

*Robin Allison welcoming  
NZSEF Fellowship members on  
a tour of the Earthsong  
Eco-Neighbourhood*



*Politics* brought to my life, was a significant part of sustaining my commitment to *Earthsong* over the next 18 years.”

Also in 1992, Allison found a group in Auckland which was exploring the idea of building a rural ecovillage. Over the next few years they met to explore environmental issues, ethics, consensus models, group dynamics, legal issues, financial structures, planning, land and eco-design. It was an important learning curve for Allison and her friends, but there were also frustrations — a continual turnover of people attending the meetings meant there was no certainty as to their levels of commitment.

Allison: “The same issues came up again and again as new people wished to re-debate issues that some of us had been through several times. A few people did most of the work, thinking and organising and putting out the newsletters. But others felt like passengers, and the overall progress and momentum stalled.”

Her marriage had ended by this time, and by 1994, the eco-village group had also effectively ceased to operate ... which left Allison in something of a quandary. She knew she wasn't ready to leave the ideas behind.... she'd invested a lot of time in doing the research, and gaining the personal and professional skills that would help make the project happen. Yet, it was going to take a whole new level of persistence to bring together a fresh group who could take the vision forward.

After a major reassessment, she decided to put her energies into developing an urban sustainable community or “eco-neighbourhood” based on cohousing principles. With key support from *Heart Politics* colleagues, Allison wrote a summary of her vision, outlining the social, environmental and design elements she envisaged.

The momentum for a new group was boosted by the visit to New Zealand by Dr. Robert Gilman, the Seattle-based founder of *In Context* magazine and author of a seminal report called *Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities*. Allison organised a public talk and seminar for Gilman where he described the layout and workings of his own cohousing community, and gave his perspectives on how this contributed to environmental and social sustainability.

Following this visit, Allison was ready to go public with her vision, and she convened a public meeting in June 1995. The meeting generated a high level of excitement and interest, and many people later contacted Allison to get involved — including Cathy Angell and John Hammond who became important partners in getting the cohousing project into motion.

It took several more years to establish the foundations, gradually increasing the numbers of those involved, refining group agreements on how they worked together, and researching the legal, financial and development strategies that would fit their project.

In 1999 they found the land they were looking for: an old orchard was for sale in Ranui, West Auckland, that had been organically managed for many years. Five members raised a deposit to purchase the land, and many others made a commitment to put money in at the time of settlement.

The prospective residents of *Earthsong* formed their own company, *Cohousing New Zealand Ltd*, as the official vehicle for developing the project. They held many more meetings over the months and years that followed... as they learned (and relearned) how to be a group which could sustain this project even though they had no prior experience of undertaking such a large-scale and innovative land development.

The group worked together to draw up a comprehensive design brief, which set out their goals for the style, materials, accommodation and layout of the new neighbourhood. They then worked in close collaboration with architect Bill Algie to design the community layout and the eco homes. Allison became the overall coordinator of the development, facilitating the design process, liaising between the group and the outside consultants, working with project managers on budgets and feasibilities, and making sure all the strings would weave together into an achievable whole.

As ideas firmed up and the plans evolved, the group took the name *Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood*. For Allison, the name evoked a deeper sense of what they were trying to create: "I felt that whatever happened on that land was the song that the earth herself was singing, and that we were all a part of that."

In 2000, the *Earthsong* group arrived at a pivotal event, which they named "Turning the First Sod". Allison: "After all those years and all that effort, it was exhilarating and mind-blowing to realize we were finally going ahead! Many people came. My son and his school friends gave a barbershop recital. We all collected by the pear tree in the middle of the property, and



*Earthsong home and garden*





said some speeches amidst a light blessing rain. We all dug our spades into the ground: this community was going to happen!”

What followed was eight years of staged construction work until *Earthsong Eco-neighbourhood* was formally completed in 2008. During that time, Allison found herself playing a great variety of leadership roles — as company director, project manager, site supervisor, architectural adviser, financial investor, group co-ordinator, host and educator, counsellor and conflict resolver, writer, archivist, neighbour and friend. She found it exciting and gratifying to be seeing the eco-neighbourhood vision finally being constructed — and yes, it was also an exhausting journey.

“My whole life was bound up in the project. I was thinking and problem solving day and night. Builders were around my home and office all week, and members came at the weekend. I felt like a strainer post that was being pulled in different directions. I was the pivot point in the middle of two extremely challenging worlds — between the *Earthsong* community, and its world of relationships, consensus, inclusion, and conflicts; and the hard-edged world of construction, consultants, development, and money. I had to learn how to become the translator of one world to the other, and back again.”

- *Earthsong* houses are designed to balance privacy and community, and have a layering of transition zones between common space and private space. There is a variety of house types and sizes from one-bedroom apartments to four-bedroom terrace houses. This enables the neighbourhood to accommodate a range of residents — from single people to families, owners and renters, the old and the young.

Instead of a road running through the middle, cars are parked at the edge of the neighbourhood and a network of pedestrian paths curve through gardens and open space to the houses. Allison: “We have arranged our buildings around common space, which is very different from the normal rows of houses facing a street with a garage at the front. This reflects our choice to place a higher importance on our relationships with each other than with our cars.”

The use of rammed earth construction and natural timbers give the houses a solid and timeless feel. Building materials and components were chosen with attention to such issues as embodied energy, toxicity, environmental impact, durability and recyclability. Allison: “Good design is a key component of environmental sustainability. The construction industry

(left) Drawing up a comprehensive design brief

(right) “Turning the First Sod” on the Ranui land





A shared pond, orchard and native bush area create a tranquil and safe atmosphere



Organic fruit and vegetables are grown and supplemented by co-operative buying



Each house has its own title including private garden



Houses are clustered around common gardens, walkways and play areas



Mobility friendly paths and houses



Rainwater is used for bathrooms, toilets and gardens



The Common House / Earthsong Centre provides facilities for both seminars and residents



Solar water-heating and passive solar design significantly reduce living costs



No toxic chemicals are used on the property for house construction, food production, or weed control



A stormwater system utilises swales and ponds to minimise run-off



as a whole is one of the highest users of resources and energy of any industry, and produces some of the worst pollution. Standard subdivision and house design in New Zealand doesn't have a great reputation for taking this into account ... and at *Earthsong* we were exploring the challenge of how to do it better."

The homes are oriented towards the north and the passive solar design (with the sun warming the coloured concrete floors) gives natural climate control, and leads to significant benefits in energy conservation. The 32 homes at *Earthsong* are managing to function with an electricity supply of a size that usually supplies six houses elsewhere in New Zealand. All households have solar water heaters, and some pay only \$30 - \$40 per month for power, even in winter.

Permaculture principles can be seen throughout the site design — in the productive and edible landscaping, the orchard, native bush and water management areas. Permaculture involves the conscious design and maintenance of productive ecosystems in a way that ensures their diversity, stability, and resilience. It aims to foster a natural cycle where the needs of one part of the system are met by a surplus from another, and where the waste from one aspect becomes a resource for another.

*Earthsong's* overland stormwater system is an example of these principles — turning a waste problem (that is usually sent off site for others to deal with) into a resource that increases biodiversity, and becomes an asset to the neighbourhood. Throughout the site are shallow vegetated channels or "swales" that collect rainwater, slow its passage, and retain as much of it on-site as possible. The channels are planted with water-loving plants such as native carex, flaxes and cabbage trees, ornamental bog sage, taro and irises, and also edible plants such as banana palms, berries and watercress. Two "marsh gardens" and the pond provide extra storage for water during a storm, and reduce the peak runoff by slowly releasing the water through throttled outlets.

There are gardens everywhere — from the large common vegetable gardens, to individual home plots around the houses. No organic waste ever needs to leave the neighbourhood, as the food scraps and weeds are highly sought after to turn into compost or feed worm farms. Grapevines shade houses from hot summer sun, while other edible plants co-exist with natives and ornamentals — giving an eclectic flourishing biodiversity which is enjoyed by birds, insects and people.

Allison: "We do grow a surprising amount of food in such a small area, including most of our summer fruit and vegetables and salad greens all year round. It is unlikely we will ever approach self-sufficiency in food — given the density of our neighbourhood — but we have set up an organic vege co-op that serves our local area, and are forging relationships with nearby organic farmers."

- In the centre of *Earthsong* is a large, beautiful community building, called the common house, which is jointly owned by all the householders and is seen as an extension of their homes. It is the social centre of the neighbourhood containing a large dining/meeting hall (capacity for 100 people), a community kitchen, sitting room, rooms for children and teens, guest accommodation, and a shared laundry.

Allison: "By keeping the individual houses compact, we were able to build a shared common house that provides many more spaces and facilities to all than any one household could provide for themselves. It is also a wonderful venue for residents' events such as large

## THE DISCUSSION CARDS



**BLACK**

*I have an interpersonal difficulty that is preventing my full participation*



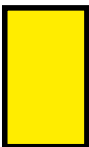
**RED**

*I have a process observation eg. the discussion is off the subject*



**ORANGE**

*I wish to acknowledge someone or something*



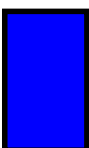
**YELLOW**

*I have a question, or need clarification*



**GREEN**

*I can provide clarification*



**BLUE**

*I have a comment or opinion*

birthdays and celebrations ... as well as being used for seminars and talks on a wide range of sustainability issues. Local community groups also use it for meetings.”

Twice a week, a beautiful home-cooked evening meal is prepared in the common house by one of eight neighbourhood cooking teams. Each team of 4-5 people cooks once a month — planning the menu, buying the food, preparing and serving the meal, doing the dishes and cleaning up. In return — for the other seven evenings a month — they get to relax after work and spend time with their families, and have a nutritious and tasty meal prepared for them.

“The cooking is a big job, but it is also usually lots of fun and a great way to get to know your neighbours. Because every team has at least one confident cook, even beginner cooks can enjoy the experience! Without a doubt, these common dinners have become the heart of our community, and many good friendships have grown around the dining tables ...”

The price of an *Earthsong* home is comparable with other new high-quality townhouses in the region, yet the residents get a lot more for their money because the price also covers a share of the common house, laundry, workshop, gardens, orchard, and a range of facilities not normally available to an individual home-owner. This sharing of resources and “common wealth” of facilities also leads to an overall reduction in consumption. For example, instead of 32 washing machines and 32 lawn mowers, the *Earthsong* residents have four washing machines in a common laundry, and two lawnmowers which serve the entire neighbourhood.

There is no selection process to join the neighbourhood. It is the choice of the individual as to whether they buy a home at *Earthsong*. The safeguard for the community is that each new buyer must become a member of *Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood* — a step which clearly defines the values, rights and responsibilities that come with living there.

Allison: “It is self-select, and this neighbourhood is made up of whoever decides to join us. We all live on this planet, and we have to find ways of living together. To make this work, we have concentrated on building a robust culture and processes that can cope with a wide diversity of people and world views.”

- *Social* sustainability has always been seen as equal and complementary to the physical design and environmental goals of *Earthsong*. The elements which support this are not just the clear agreements around personal and collective rights and responsibilities, and also involve a strong set of social tools for communication, decision-making and conflict resolution.

It is perhaps surprising for an outsider to discover that all of the major decisions relating to the design and the policies of neighbourhood life at *Earthsong* have been arrived at by a *consensus* of the members. On the face of it, this may seem like an impractical choice for a complex housing development ... but as Allison points out, it is an intrinsic part of their vision for *social* sustainability.

“We have been committed to consensus decision-making from the start, because it is the most inclusive form of decision-making. We have proved that it is effective here ... and we have managed to go a whole lot further than if this project was driven by the vision and decisions of just one or two people. Consensus means that we can take advantage of the combined strength of experience, skills, and resources of all of those involved. The diverse perspectives help us to think things through and make better informed decisions. And once



the decisions have been made, we can be supportive of and accountable to each other in carrying them out, and be reminded of our shared vision.”

The consensus process is sometimes misunderstood — especially when the co-operative idealism turns into a “tyranny of the dissenter”. However, the *Earthsong* consensus ensures that all participants have the right to be heard, but not to veto. A dissenting voice must either clearly ask for time to make a better case, or else step aside and agree not to impede the implementation of a decision.

This clarity is helped by a simple yet effective system using coloured cards to facilitate discussion and decision-making. The cards were first introduced to the *Earthsong* group by Robert Gilman, and the system is used by many cohousing groups world-wide.

Every member at a meeting has a set of six coloured cards and if they want to speak, they raise the appropriate card at any time during the discussion. The colour of the card indicates the priority they will be given by the facilitator.

Black cards have first priority, and the holder is asked to state their difficulty and how they would like the matter dealt with. The group then decides whether this should be processed within the meeting or between the individuals concerned. The red card has the next priority, and is used to point out a process issue such as a breach of procedure, or the discussion going off-topic or over-time. Next, people with orange cards (the “thankyou” card) are called upon to give their acknowledgments. After a question has been asked using a yellow card, people raise green cards to provide clarification. Only after all questions have been answered does the facilitator call on those holding blue cards to state their comments and opinions.

When the group is ready to make a decision, each person holds up a card to indicate their level of support for the proposal. If orange or red cards are raised, those people get to voice their concerns if they have not already done so, and the proposal may be amended. A second show of cards then follows, and a proposal is passed unless there is a red card that is still being raised.

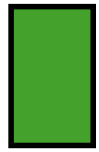
Allison: “Our consensus process means that dominant personalities in our group find it harder to push their ideas through at the expense of less vocal members, and softer-spoken members find it easier to voice their concerns. It is a decision-making model which allows members to voice reservations while still allowing the overall proposals to proceed.”

If consensus is not reached, the proposal is sent back to the appropriate focus group for more work. If consensus is still not reached at a subsequent meeting, and the proposal is considered both important and urgent, then the decision can be made by a 75% majority vote. (This has only happened twice in the 15-year history of the project).

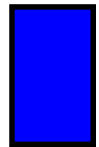
Allison concedes that she has struggled at times with the tensions between a “consensus of equals” philosophy, and the leadership skills and determination that were also obviously needed to take the overall project forward, and see it to completion.

“A project like this has required huge leadership — not just from me but from lots of people. And there were times when the fact of this was a difficult thing to say in the group because it got so many backs up. Yes, we are a group where everyone has equal input into and impact on decision-making ... *and* it has needed leadership. The edges of making this

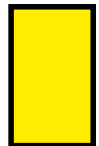
## THE DECISION CARDS



**GREEN**  
*I agree with the proposal at hand*



**BLUE**  
*I am neutral or basically for it, with some slight reservation*



**YELLOW**  
*I have a question to be answered before I can make a decision*



**ORANGE**  
*I have a serious reservation, but I am not willing to block consensus*



**RED**  
*I am entirely against the proposal and will block consensus*

work have at times been very difficult to manage, because culturally we haven't had a lot of experience of leadership in that consensus environment."

"When we have had conflicts, the underlying issues often seemed to be about power. I know this project would never have happened without enough of us feeling a sense of power to create our own model, and make the project our highest priority for as long as it takes. And being powerful in this way does not mean there is less available for other people — because personal power is not a *finite* resource!"

- *Earthsong* has been a major \$15 million development created by a group of ordinary New Zealanders who didn't have any extraordinary financial resources. They also had to learn how to navigate their way through a complex industry in order to create the homes and neighbourhood that they wanted to live in.

It has been a journey that has come with many difficulties and lessons. Allison: "The whole building industry is incredibly complex, and involves so many different people with different skills, and different materials and different agendas ... and the fact is that doing anything comprehensively innovative and ground-breaking in the building industry is extremely difficult."

Some of the challenges were financial. The housing development had no financial support from either public or private organisations until well into the second stage of the project. The prospective *Earthsong* owners paid all the costs faced by a normal commercial developer, and in addition paid a premium for the research, development and approval costs of unusual construction methods and the design of eco-friendly on-site services.

Another hurdle was that the innovations of *Earthsong* were not given a realistic market value by financial institutions. Allison: "We had the houses valued off the plans, and the initial valuations we received were only half of what they were going to cost to build! This was a huge hurdle for us — and a problem that was also encountered by the first cohousing communities in the United States. Valuers don't anticipate the market, they base their figures on historical data. And they didn't value in the benefits of low energy, healthy houses or the shared facilities."

This was important because the banks would only lend *Cohousing NZ Ltd* up to 80% of the total value of the project as a construction loan. If the construction costs were indeed higher than the valuation, then they'd have to find much more equity to finance the project. A low valuation also affected an individual buyers' ability to get a pre-approved mortgage to purchase their house. After struggling with the crucial threads of construction costs, valuations, house prices, house sales and construction loan conditions, they finally managed to bring all the details together so that construction could begin.

Because they were using non-standard materials and construction systems, *Earthsong* had a very limited choice of building contractors. They needed a contractor of sufficient size who could handle the project, and also had the appropriate skills in rammed earth construction. They chose a construction company that was well-established in building single rammed earth houses, and hired professional project managers to work alongside and mentor the company in the systems required for such a large project.

Three-quarters of the way through the building of the first 17 houses, the *Earthsong* group hit their biggest hurdle — the construction company found themselves in financial difficulties

(largely caused by previous contracts) and went into liquidation. This was a very serious setback which cost *Earthsong* a substantial amount of money in delays, complications, and the non-delivery of materials already paid for. They managed to find other builders to finish the houses, but they found they had to delete all non-essential items from their future building plans.

Allison: “As painful as it was, the group was incredibly strong through this process. Everyone pulled together, and even though we were making hard decisions to cut things out of the budget, we came through with little conflict. I was so proud of us through that awful time ...”

Despite these major construction challenges and a very lengthy development process, it is a considerable achievement that, at 2011, the *Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood* project was almost in a break-even financial position.

- Since becoming a member of the Social Entrepreneur Fellowship, Allison has hosted several tours of *Earthsong* for fellowship members, as well as the Social Innovation Investment Group and the Tindall Foundation. She has welcomed the chance to deepen her learning on issues of entrepreneurship and innovation, and she lists “peer support” as the main benefit she has gained from her participation in the fellowship so far.

Allison: “The tools and skills and specific conversations at the retreats have been very helpful, but I think the biggest thing for me has been the sense of belonging to a group of peers. Even though at *Earthsong* we are working as an equal group, I think my own experience of the whole project has been very different from anyone else’s. It can be very lonely taking this variety of leadership ... so to find a whole bunch of other people has been a huge support — because they have gone through similar experiences and understand the range of issues that come with being an innovator.”

Earthsong has perhaps one of the most ambitious social and environmental visions of any similar cohousing project worldwide. For this reason, Allison has ensured that the story of

*(left) The Earthsong common house which is also a centre for education in sustainability*

*(right) An Earthsong community meeting in progress*







*Earthsong  
Eco-Neighbourhood*

how they have gone about creating it is comprehensively documented. Most of her research and information is freely available on their internet website at [www.earthsong.org.nz](http://www.earthsong.org.nz).

“We have always felt that the biggest contribution we could make to global sustainability was not only to build a neighbourhood to the highest practical standards of sustainable human settlement, but also to share what we have learnt with others ...”

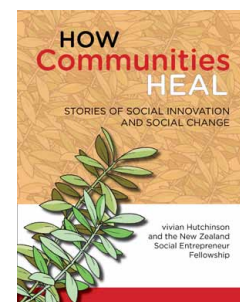
Now that the construction of *Earthsong* has been completed, Allison is turning her attention to the nearby Ranui town centre. Ranui is a culturally and economically diverse suburb, and, though the centre is currently run-down, is home to a surprising number of innovative organisations and initiatives. The land on *Earthsong's* road frontage adjacent to the town centre is owned by an offshoot of *Earthsong* called *Walk-to-Work Eco-Developments Ltd*, which plans to develop eco-friendly shops and offices to house businesses such as natural food and clothing stores, environmental consultants and sustainability education initiatives.

As a representative of *Walk-to-Work* Allison has been working with other commercial landowners in the *Ranui Central Development Network* to collaborate on planning the redevelopment of the town centre. They see the potential to transform the area into a community-supported and valued local centre that builds on the strengths and diversity of the community, showcases ethical and sustainable business and is a flagship project for social enterprise and community participation.

Allison: “I believe that, over time, an entire city can be regenerated by turning suburban neighbourhoods into eco-suburbs, providing a diverse mix of houses, workplaces, schools and shops that are within walking distance of most homes. This regeneration helps to re-establish the sense of belonging and relationship with your neighbours that is often missing in contemporary life ... and it may also be essential for the long-term health and sustainability of both ourselves and our planet.”

# Notes and Links

- This article by vivian Hutchinson is part of the [HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project](#) — stories of social innovation and social change featuring members of the New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship. It is available online at [tinyurl.com/hchallison](http://tinyurl.com/hchallison)
- Robin Allison can be contacted at [robin.allison@earthsong.org.nz](mailto:robin.allison@earthsong.org.nz) or at *Earthsong* Eco-Neighbourhood, P.O.Box 70001, Ranui, Waitakere 0655 or at 457 Swanson Rd, Ranui, Waitakere City
- *the Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood website ...* is at [www.earthsong.org.nz](http://www.earthsong.org.nz). This website was extensively updated by Robin Allison in 2010 and is an “open source” documentation on how the neighbourhood was created, the design and materials used, and the ongoing developmental story of the community. This profile article has drawn extensively from this material.
- *Cohousing ...* the concept originated in Denmark in the early 1970s as a form of collaborative housing where residents actively participated in the design and operation of their own neighbourhoods. It was introduced to the English-speaking world in the late 1980s by the book “*Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*” by architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett (available on Amazon at [astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/O898155398](http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/O898155398).) There are now hundreds of cohousing communities around the world, from Europe to North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.
- *Cohousing — A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, by Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, and *Eco-Villages and Sustainable Communities*, by Robert Gilman, Context Institute, WA USA 1994
- *The Cohousing Handbook*, by Chris and Kelly Scotthansen available on Amazon at [astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/O865715173](http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/O865715173)
- Permaculture (*permanent agriculture*) ... is the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems that have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. The concept was developed by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in Australia in 1978. It has subsequently flourished throughout the world as a system for applying human intelligence and ingenuity to work with the natural order. It has also evolved to encompass strategies not only for agriculture but for a more permanent (i.e. evolving but sustainable) culture.
- *Introduction to Permaculture*, B. Mollison, Tagari, Tyalgum, N.S.W. Australia, 1991
- *Waitakere City Council ...* in 1993 committed itself to being an “Eco-City”, a decision which was a factor in *Earthsong* choosing to locate in the Ranui area. *Earthsong's* relationship with the Waitakere City Council grew to the point where they signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2003, which recognised *Earthsong* as a partner in demonstrating current and future practice for sustainable homes and communities. Later the Waitakere City Council approved a \$300,000 interest-free loan to help with building the common house, which would also be known as the *Earthsong* Centre for education in sustainability. In 2010, Waitakere City was amalgamated into the wider Auckland “super-city”.
- *Earthsong Submission for World Habitat Awards 2008* by Robin Allison can be read at [tinyurl.com/allisonhabitat2008](http://tinyurl.com/allisonhabitat2008)
- “*Sustainable Town Centres and Communities*” report by Robin Allison (2009) to Winston Churchill Memorial Trust on her research trip to sustainable community and town centre projects in the United Kingdom, Europe and North America can be read at [tinyurl.com/allisonchurchill09](http://tinyurl.com/allisonchurchill09)
- “*A Deeper Shade of Green — Sustainable Urban Development, Building and Architecture in New Zealand*” (2008) edited by Johann Bernhardt ISBN 978-0958287838



- “Sustainable Community – Learning from the Cohousing Model” by Graham Meltzer 2005 available on Amazon at [astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/1412049946](http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/1412049946)
- Radio New Zealand interviews with David Steemson ... “City Talk” 15 September 1997, “Close to Paradise” Spectrum 20 May 2001, and “Celebration of Completion of Construction of Earthsong” 29 April 2009.
- Robin Allison interviewed on Cohousing by Chris Laidlaw on *Ideas* (Radio New Zealand National) 29 August 2010 is available at [tinyurl.com/IdeasAllison](http://tinyurl.com/IdeasAllison)
- *Robin Allison comments* also taken from the *Earthsong* website at [www.earthsong.org.nz](http://www.earthsong.org.nz), and her workshop presentations at the NZ Social Entrepreneur Fellowship Retreats at Long Bay 2007 - 2009, the NZSEF Social Innovation Dialogue on Housing Issues June 2008, catch-up interviews with Vivian Hutchinson 18 July 2008, and 28 July 2009, and interview for the HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project 28 June 2011.
- More articles in this series, and further information on the HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project can be found at [www.nzsef.org.nz/howcommunitiesheal](http://www.nzsef.org.nz/howcommunitiesheal)
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