

Questions: Cat Fletcher

### What in your previous careers/lifestyle made you turn to a career in Waste Prevention?

The previous things i've done are bit bonkers! So I've been a psychiatric nurse and I went to University and did not get my degree in fine arts because I got pregnant in my final year. I was doing photography and back in the day when we didn't have computers everything was done in the dark room, so i was actually banned from entering the dark room because of the chemicals, really old school. So, yeah, used to make stuff, loads of stuff, do mural paintings all sorts of things. Through my studies at university, I used to always, what you call here, ducked and dived, so i would buy and sell stuff and do markets and make stuff back in Sydney. I worked in cafes and nightclubs and shit like that to put myself through uni, then i had three kids, i had focus on them for a while. I bought and sold shop fittings at the time, loads and really weird things like polystyrene, 15 foot high columns and I actually ended up working in the music industry for years, selling ice to the eskimos and doing PR, so, when I was in my thirties I shifted that skill set into waste prevention really and it sort of had an organic birth but i just couldn't bare waste.

### Living in Australia and moving to the UK, how has the difference in the throwaway cultures impacted on your view on waste?

Well when I came here from Australia it was 1992 and in Sydney we had curb side recycling, everyone recycled then as it was just the norm so, when I came here it was like going back to the dark ages and stepped back in time in so many ways. Honestly the Uk was not sophisticated and cool like it is now, it was just really old school, really unprogressive. You had no recycling, no body knew what i was talking about so one of the things i did when i first came here, every Monday or Tuesday i would drive round to my fiends houses and force them to separate their recycling after the weekend and drive round and pick it up; they must of thought i was completely bonkers, like why would i be picking up these big bags of cans or rubbish like what the fuck? So i was really shocked when i got here, but things have changed massively over the past 25 years.

### So do you think Australia is always staying one step ahead or do you think UK has matched it?

So unfortunately i think Australia is a great example of the tragedy of having everything at your fingers tips and a lovely golden life. I would say that the UK in a lot of ways is ahead of Australia now because Australia's incredibly indulgent, has a really high standard of living. They didn't have the financial crash like a lot of the western world did, they are sitting on a lot of resources like Ionor and Copper which they've literally just sold off for the last twenty years like a mad man, for the future of our future generations. It's just starting to bite them in the bum now, like the great barrier reef is 90% bleached, they have no governance or policies in place to actually address that problem, and they're still mining coal like it's the new big breakthrough.

What happens with waste in Australia is that we have such a vast amount of land and such a small population which is concentrated in less than 5% of the land, just around the coast primarily, we have 7 different states who have independent governments and what they tend to do is unbelievably drive and train waste between states and all around, with a lot of burying as there's so much land. Interestingly we only occupy 6% of the land mass in the UK, but we don't have the luxury of transporting waste around moving a pretending it disappeared. It's interesting that we're more parallel now and have more of an urgency to address a lot of things. One of the deadly frustrating things about waste management systems, waste regulations, waste infrastructure in the UK is

that from Westminster, it has devolved so Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have completely isolated infrastructure, ambitions and investment for waste prevention and waste management. Wales and Scotland are doing really dynamic. In England, what Westminster has said to every 355 local authorities this is, what you need to achieve and we don't mind how you do it and the end result of that is that we have around 355 completely different systems on how we manage waste and how we facilitate recycling in all the different local authorities. The downfall of government actually is that while trying to give local authorities liberty and decision making over to local areas and regions actually if you think about it waste is a very generic thing so if you parallel it to something like the rail service; imagine if every different county had a different size rail track and you wanted to go from here to London and you had to get off at every border of every council because the tracks were a different size, that's kind of what we've done with waste management.

**Working with the University of Brighton, you were one of the main drivers for the creation of the Waste House, What was it like working on this project and as there any problems you faced for example whilst working with recycled materials?**

Being part of The Waste House project that was a pioneering project that opened in 2014, it that was meant to stimulate conversation and inspiration about all sorts of things but more about how we live, like the spaces that we live in and how we design and build those are really imperative and can alter how we behave. ( building our houses out of waste )

Well, it's not something that we think people should be building from waste or second hand materials, if we're really honest there's a massive proportion of the global population that already build out of waste and second hand materials. There's great sways of communities across Africa Asia and South America. It really is there to engage, which is does with many different levels of profession. Although reused, second hand construction materials were used to make the structure of the waste house, the novel methodology of construction of the material walls are really really deep and are filled with everyday waste that i had just collected from around Brighton and Hove. All of those items are things that we all consume and we have consumed, so a lot of these things are obsolete now. We collected a lot of things like video tapes, floppy discs and CDs and DVD cases that we collected from second hand rental places that closed down and all the things have a high proportion of plastic in them so were trying to draw attention to that. There is a myriad of things that we can change looking a different construction methods like making leather out of orange peel or carpets out of old fish nets, we've actually been experimenting with The Waste House. Recently, we have changed out a wall replacing the cladding with recycled duvets with monitors in the walls, collecting data like the fluctuation in temperature, if theres off gassing all sorts of things, so it's not just cute ideas there is actually some evidence gathering going on. We also took some carpet tiles off the outside cladding and replaced it with tiles made by local studios, some local artists who have collected waste oyster shells from local seafood restaurants along with waste aggregate from the university building site and created a whole brand new material that looks almost like granite or marble, just to experiment which was nice side project.

**The Waste house is a pioneering project for the future of conscious living, do you think at some point in the future, a building like this will be the norm? Everything being made from second hand products.**

There has to come a point in time where we're not all set in such a bonkers system; currently we're set in a linear economic model, where you make resources, you take them and make something and discard them creating waste, and that's a human design system which is good news, because we can redesign the system. So, if we work towards a circular economy where you take resources and design them in such a way, whatever the product you are making will be a reprise forever more, so you can design out pointless waste and that might be around making things repairable or using less materials. But there's defiantly hope but part of the challenge is drawing ordinary people's attention to the pointlessness and wastefulness of the stuff they consume and then all the impacts of that. They're so many groups of individuals that are super inspired which I have seen really increase over the last 5 years but we need to do more and I don't know what the tipping point for that is going to be. There is always going to be a whole bunch of people that don't give a shit so we need systemic change.

**What have you implemented into your lifestyle that you've found effective to reduce waste and any advice to people looking to reduce their consumption waste and becoming more in tune with what they buy?**

One weird thing about me is that I don't get a whole lot of pleasure from buying something new, I just haven't for decades. I just kind of realised in my twenties that it actually made me feel worse, I would just get that high from getting something but the next day or next week that no joy was sparked and often I would have complex feelings about the relationship to that dress or those shoes I had bought, like I had spent money I didn't have or maybe I could have gone away for the weekend if I hadn't. For me, it hasn't really been a big shift as I really haven't consumed very much, but I would say that anyone with small children is to get them out in nature as it will definitely benefit them later in life as it makes you realise how they have to work with nature. It's almost a post modern or post industrial ideology that we conquer nature, we are human always conquering things and I think the downfall of that mentality is coming back now and we're much better working with nature rather than trying to conquer it, so that human beings have an actual connection to the planet and other living things and how they all interconnect. One really cool thing that people can do is non essential consumption, not really talking about food but have a one in one out policy. If you buy a pair of jeans when you get it home, you then sell or donate to charity so you're not building up this whole inventory of stuff. We need to stop consuming brand new stuff less. Anything you can do like going to a clothes swap, hang out in charity shops, go to a vintage fair, you know get together with your friends you know and swap amongst yourself.

**As Freegle is a platform for reusing and repurposing items, and is used by thousands, why do you think there is still a disconnection between consumers and what they buy?**

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**Why do you think we connect ourselves with particular objects that we keep for longer than others?**

Life is really about people, not about stuff. You have those objects that mean something to you because they are a memory of an experience, or sentiment that's attached to a particular person or a feeling. It's often not about the specific ness of the object.

**What is the most treasured object you own?**

My most treasured object is something i don't even use but it's a Sextant. It belonged to my dad, it's like a really old navigational equipment that you'd use before you had computers or radar there a bit hard to explain, it's just a really odd thing but it's cool and it's a one off.

**Name the top 3 people who inspire you.**

Many people inspire me. i think i'd have to say my kids, they really inspire me just because they're nice people and they're all really different. I really like Dame Ellen MacArthur just for creating a movement and something really high level that's engaging corporates. It's quite hard to get it just down to three people. I'm inspired by loads of young people as well, i mean like meeting you and all the people i meet through The Waste House and all these other events that go on. It's really inspiring to me that you did even cause this bloody problem and you're really happy to rise to the challenge and tackle it.