

# A community for big dreams to grow

Story by **Emma Masters**



Page left: The village's new sign was a collaboration between resident artists Mark Timberlake and Margie Goodchild, among others. Above: A newer home in the village with beautifully designed gardens of hardy native plantings, vegetables and water-wise plants.

When artists Viv Newcombe and Barbara Powell first set eyes on the barren land that stretched from near Aldinga's Old Coach Road toward Port Willunga, they were horrified. 'There were hardly any leafy trees on it. There certainly wasn't the babbling brook they'd hoped for, Willunga Creek was way down the hill, full of weeds and not flowing,' retired Adelaide architect John Maitland says.

It was the late '90s and John had been helping the pioneering South Australian artist group find land to establish a holistic community of ecological homes. They imagined a place they could retire to, where they could share arts practices in common spaces and strive for a life that was in greater sync with nature. An idyllic idea, but the visit to the thirty-four hectare allotment was anything but that. 'The land still had horses on it, it was just a disaster, and they were just thoroughly depressed,' John adds.

Excited by a vision for an artists' village on the Fleurieu Peninsula, John invited architectural colleague and mentor Albert Gillissen to

revisit the site with the group. 'He was so energetic and eloquent they all fell in love with him and then the dirt. And that's what turned the whole project into something possible,' he says.

Many conversations later, the artists were joined by Steve Poole and his group who happened right then to be looking at the same land, to establish their permaculture community. 'Permies' see bare land as a planting opportunity, with a food forest vision, orchards, streets with fruit trees, indigenous plants, farm production, resource sharing and a culture of caring. It was a beautiful match.

Decades later that barren plot of land has become the renowned Aldinga Arts Eco-village, which features around 170 ecological homes for more than 300 residents. A community that this year celebrates its 20th anniversary as a world's first eco-village established with an arts focus.

Taking a walking tour around the area under an azure, spring sky with residents Vanda Rounsefell and Mary Davies, it's hard to imagine the bare paddock it once was. Now, cobble-detailed walking paths, lush, grassy nooks and quiet streets with blooming native gardens cover the once bare dirt. It's even more difficult to comprehend when you walk into the adjacent permaculture farm. Fruit trees blossom alongside chickens and goats, and fertile community garden plots >



Top left: It is hard to imagine that the village was once a somewhat barren paddock now that it is full of inspirational gardens. Top right: Village Greens of Willunga Creek grows organic produce on the village farm. Bottom left: Ballast stone features throughout the village and creates continuity in the design of the landscape throughout. Above right: The newly built sharing shed is available to villagers for meetings, workshops, shared meals and events.

sit next to organic fruit and vegetable business Village Greens. The place is positively brimming with life.

'The village has always had a strong focus on the cycle of life,' Mary explains as we walk near the village wastewater pond, home to various ducks and geese. 'All waste is treated on site, with the grey water used for watering trees and solid waste processed and reused in compost. There were concerns the pond would stink up the entire area, but we proved people wrong.'

As our tour moves to a quiet corner of the eco-village near a shady grove, Vanda outlines the in-depth work involved in establishing it as South Australia's first natural burial ground. So far, three residents have been buried there. 'This community has a strong history of ground-breaking work, of continually pushing for sustainable practices across the board,' Vanda says.

This connection to nature's cycles is something that Jon and Anne Scott relish about village life. They say it teaches their children Cassidy, nine, and Ione, five, the seasonality of fresh food and the importance of only taking what you can eat. That sense of caring for others in a community was a real drawcard for the couple. 'The whole idea of intentional community and being challenged to live more closely with people and knowing we need to work together and that you don't always get your own way, it really appealed,' Anne says.

They explain the village has finely tuned its management structures over the years. They've developed an ecosystem of governance and responsibilities ranging from by-laws that offer clear guidelines on everything from building to pet management, to monthly working bees and annual meetings that determine major projects and expenditure, such as the 'Sharing Shed' (the village's community hall). 'People have

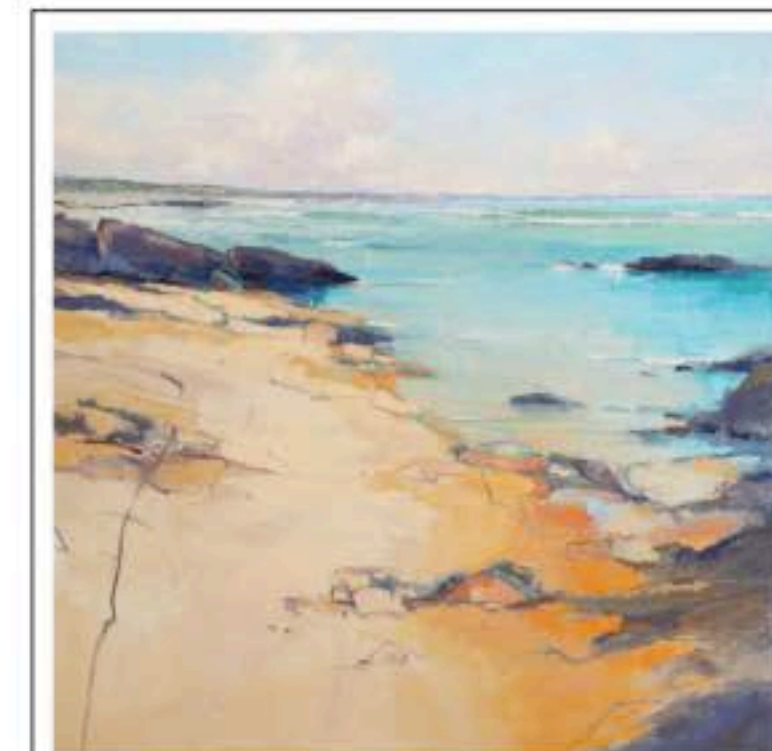
learnt lessons about how to make decisions and workshop ideas, but conflict naturally still comes up. Like everything, there's always an element of compromise,' Jon explains.

There's also a changing demographic emerging in the village as children begin to outnumber those aged 70 and above. 'On face value it looks like it could be a retirement village, but it's deliberately set up as multi-generational. There's a great benefit of having people of different ages and skill sets that can contribute in different ways,' Jon adds. 'I sometimes joke that it's like a big caravan park because there's no fences and kids are always around on bikes and enjoying the outdoors, they feel safe, like a traditional childhood.'

The Scotts also reflect on the role the eco-village plays in the region. 'The Fleurieu Peninsula is a beautiful place to live so it attracts people who are interested in the environment and community,' Jon says. 'Many people from the village are involved in the Willunga Market, SA's earliest farmers' market, which is about local produce being shared with less food miles. And then there's others who dedicate their time to lobbying for better development in the region with housing that's more eco-friendly with sensible design and open spaces.'

'There's lots of people in the village who get involved in environmental groups, like Biodiversity McLaren Vale, the Willunga Environment Centre and Trees for Life,' Anne adds. 'We're also very close to the Willunga Waldorf School and there's a large contingent of Waldorf families in the village as well.'

Could it be that the Fleurieu naturally attracts alternative thinkers or is it that alternative thinkers are actively helping to shape the village and beyond? I reckon it could be a bit of both. 🌱



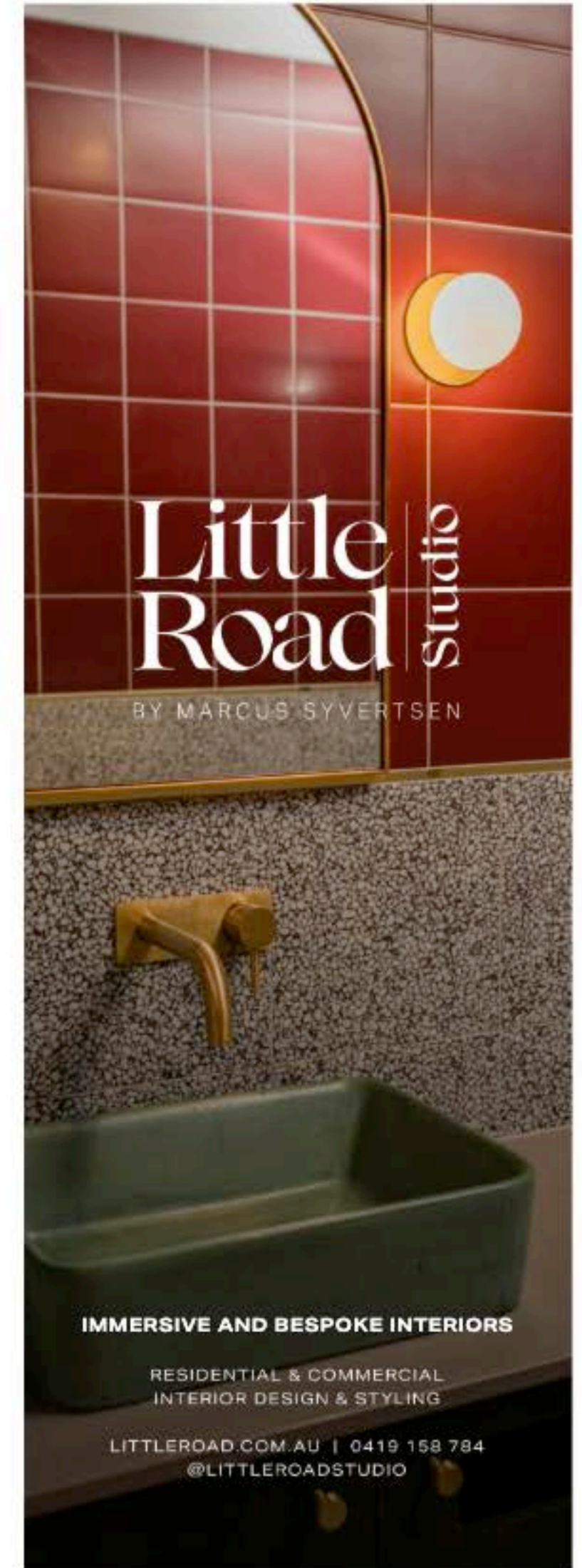
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