

“Need to remember real face of Arab world”

By JANINE WATSON

LOCAL architect Michael Fox is back from a trip to Gaza and keen to set the record straight on what he sees as a complete misrepresentation of the Arab world by western media.

He is also outraged that people are forced to live in the narrow Gaza Strip in a siege-like existence.

Michael has forged a career based on designing buildings accessible to those with a disability, and was in Gaza as part of working group to report to the UN.

“The people have extraordinary spirit and resilience...”

- Michael Fox

Since 2007, when Hamas was democratically elected to power, the people of Gaza have been living under a virtual blockade by Israel.

Hamas is often portrayed as an ‘extremist’ organisation but according to Mr Fox this is just another element of the western media’s misrepresentation of the Arab world.

“I met with Hamas leaders: the Prime Minister and other government ministers and they were all very well-dressed, articulate and hard-working people, doing the very best they can in an



COMPLETE DESTRUCTION: Pacific Palms architect Micheal Fox in Gaza as part of a delegation which will report to the UN on humanitarian emergencies. You can see in the background an international school has been completely destroyed. Michael saw many schools, hospitals and government buildings destroyed by the incursions which have been stepped up following the election of Hamas in 2007.

extreme situation. Most people said that if they were to have elections again, Hamas would be re-elected.”

The Gaza Strip is bordered on the south by Egypt and on the east and north

by Israel and out to sea Israeli gun ships patrol.

“The people have extraordinary spirit and resilience in what is an intolerable situation – it’s like living in a jail.

Buildings have been demolished from constant incursions but nothing can be repaired as Israel has stopped the supply of cement into Gaza.”

He saw people getting around on carts,

led by donkeys, as petrol can only be smuggled in through underground tunnels and was saddened to learn that more than half the people live in refugee camps.

International travel is nothing new for Mr Fox with a number of high-level appointments over the years on top of his successful architectural business. For example, he was the president of Rehabilitation International (RI) for four years. RI is a global network of experts, professionals and advocates working together to empower people with disabilities.

This international work came out of his involvement in setting up a series of Australian standards on accessibility.

“There were no standards, no laws. We had to invent it and out of that I became the global president of RI connected with the UN.”

One of his earliest clients was Lionel Watts who founded House With No Steps in 1962 and from then on he decided to focus on the issue of access for those with a disability. It’s been his niche ever since.

Closer to home he plays his part in improving access for all, as a member of Great Lakes Council’s Access Committee.

He hopes to share his impressions of the Arab world through his local networks and the media (he was speaking to the Sydney Morning Herald following his *Advocate* interview) and is buoyed that the Bush/Howard combination is a thing of the past.

“We have to remember the highly sophisticated real face of the Arab world.

“So much of our culture of science, mathematics and agriculture came out of the Arab world. It’s just such a shame we’ve got the story so wrong.”

IMAGE PROBLEM:

Local architect Michael Fox with just some of the government representatives he met with in Gaza. He said the people were intelligent, hard working and articulate – far from the stereotype radical portrayed in the media.



INDOMITABLE SPIRIT: With the Israeli blockade of Gaza, locals are forced to either smuggle petrol in or think of other ways to get around.



NO MERCY: Government offices in Gaza City destroyed by Israeli bombings.