

## **TASA paper: Social Sustainability: Intergenerational Engagement through Design**

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### Introduction

A growing body of research supports the idea that community and neighbourhood empowerment—giving residents the opportunity to take part in collective activities that influence the areas they live in—contributes to the wellbeing of residents and communities. This paper explores the relationship between social connectivity and participation in a society, and its wellbeing. Given that the way our cities and towns are planned impacts upon our capacity to connect with one another, the paper then explores by extension the correlation between participation in decision-making about the built environment and its impact on wellbeing.

The second part of the paper also considers the value of the role that design plays as a mechanism to create a public conversation about possible futures shaped by changes to the built environment. This is of vital importance since evidence shows that communities, who lack opportunities for residents to influence planning and development decisions, resulting in inflexible and inadequate local facilities, suffer social as well as financial costs. (Woodcraft et al, 2011). A recent example of a design led participatory project, which involved more than 150,000 city residents for integrated city design- called 5000+, will be discussed to illustrate the value the design process offers a city's users to participate.

The third part of the paper will discuss the opportunity that this kind of design led engagement offers for facilitating intergenerational participation and the importance of a common intergenerational language when discussing issues relating to place. This discussion will also rely on observations from Kaplan in a New York project called Neighborhoods 2000 which occurred in 1997 and, like 5000+ sought to include people of all ages in a discussion regarding the future design of the built environment.

### **Part 1: Social Sustainability, wellbeing and participatory Urban Design**

Around 80% of Australians live in major cities, so decisions about them are everyone's business, and the Grattan Institute remind us that how we build cities can either help or hinder social connection (Kelly, 2012). If the progress of a community is measured by how well it moves towards set goals and values (ANDI, 2010) then the evolution of a city results largely from countless decisions by many, many residents (Kelly, 2010, p5). Until recently, most of the national conversations about our progress have been focused on *economic* growth as Australia's main aim. This is true for many nations. Over the past 30 years, Britain's Gross Domestic Product has more than doubled, yet there has been no corresponding increase in life satisfaction (Hothi et al, 2008, p12). At the same time 'In the past two decades, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a "global movement" (Giovannini, 2008) has developed around the need to move

“Beyond GDP” and to develop new ways of “Measuring the Progress of Societies” which provide “a more comprehensive view of progress that takes into account social and environmental concerns as well as economic ones” ( ABS 2008). These new measures have emerged as a valuable tool for integrated planning, a firmer evidence base for policy, and a stronger, more citizen-engaged democracy.’ (Salvaris 2010) As the current international movement toward a more engaged democracy demonstrates, there is a transformation currently occurring in which we are witnessing increased public participation in the decision-making that will affect their communities and their lives. This paper begins to explore the nature of the relationship between participation in decision-making, wellbeing and the way we build cities.

The 2011 report entitled *Design for Social Sustainability – a framework for creating thriving new communities* established a framework for designing, building and creating successful communities. Completed in 2011 by the Young Foundation, it was commissioned by the UK Homes and Communities Agency, the national public body that funds new affordable housing and land regeneration in England. This research study identified four key elements that are “essential to build new communities that will be successful and sustainable in the long term”. (Woodcraft 2011). These are (1) Amenities and social structure, (2) Social and cultural life (3) Voice and influence and (4) Space to grow. In further detail under Voice and influence, the report suggests that engaging residents in the process of designing a new community is critical in terms of empowering the community. The report argues that empowerment can contribute to wellbeing in three ways: (a) ‘Creating

opportunities for residents to influence decisions’ (b) Facilitate contact between neighbours’ and (c) ‘Builds residents’ confidence to control local circumstances. This literature demonstrates the correlation between participation in decision-making about the built environment and its impact on wellbeing. As I have argued elsewhere (Edmonds 2013) Engaging the public in deliberative processes which inform decision-making and planning has become a greater priority in transformative contemporary governance and is well documented in deliberative policy literature. I will now turn to examining the value of design in facilitating processes of participation which impact upon wellbeing through the ways outlined above.

## **Part 2: Value of Design as participatory inclusive process (+ case study example)**

Design of the built environment is a process with many stages. While a job for a single client may be offered with a clear brief, a job to engage residents in their aspirations for city making begins by involving them in a participatory process of brief writing. Brief writing requires upfront research about the context of the site(s), its history, analysis of its existing performance, identification of issues that need to be overcome, and clarity about performance aspirations for the site in future.

This research can be informed by the public’s knowledge of these matters, which is of tremendous value. Such an approach confirms Parker’s argument (2007, p147) in favor of a kind of innovation that requires user knowledge ‘as much as it needs new forms of technology or eureka moments.’ This enhanced understanding of expertise,

she argues, is what allows policy-makers to focus on creating greater parity between traditional forms of evidence and the experiential insight citizens bring to the table.

The performance analysis and future speculations that occur in a built environment design process can act as a method to engage the public in deliberation about possible options and their relative merits. Thus design offers a critical contribution as a connecting voice, conduit and catalyst for working in, with and for community and government, to interpret and translate their aspirations into an inspirational vision for the future.

As Brown (2009, p41) explains, 'the core principle of design thinking is to put people first, which requires developing an insight into human behaviour, learning about how people interact with the service or product in question'. In the case of urban design, this means how people interact with their natural and built environments. Brown (2009, p106) continues: 'creative thinking, hope and optimism are necessary for divergent exploration of options to solving problems with prototyping, necessary to discuss and test their benefits'.

The paper will introduce a particular design-led example of decision-making about the built environment in Adelaide, South Australia, with which the author was involved during a ten month secondment to South Australian government Department of Premier and Cabinet as 'Engagement Leader' for the project. While the evidence of that project's long-term impact is some years in the future, we will examine the extent to which engaging residents in the process of strategic urban design delivered upon the necessary framework under voice and influence outlined

by Woodcraft et al; (a) 'Creating opportunities for residents to influence decisions' (b) Facilitate contact between neighbours' and (c) 'Builds residents' confidence to control local circumstances and we will also look at the impact particularly of the intergenerational approach during the Child and Youth Friendly City work in that project. Let me now turn to an outline of the 5000+ case study.

#### Case Study: 5000+ An Integrated Design Strategy for inner Adelaide

5000+ is a project about city redesign, and city renewal for inner Adelaide. As previously described, it was a pilot supported by federal, state and local governments over eighteen months which sought to create an Integrated Design Strategy for Adelaide. Engagement events for policy change or urban development in Australia have traditionally been based on minimum statutory requirements. Often stakeholders and community are neither proactively engaged early, nor consulted during significant processes such as policy change and urban development (Integrated Design Strategy, 2011, p14). The 5000+ process challenged this history of limited public engagement in urban renewal. As a pilot project, it sought to demonstrate new ways of working through an innovative model for public engagement, which could be replicable on future projects where collaborative decision-making about city strategy is required.

Based on a people-centred approach, the 5000+ project was design-led and used design thinking and processes to problem solve and innovate as a demonstration of the *value of using a design process to engage the public in city making*. Informed by an evidence base of international and national best practice case studies,

propositions for city renewal were discussed and tested by industry, government, non-government organisations and the public. In addition to the project's online presence, with which more than 150,000 people engaged, the project and its propositions were presented at dozens of public events including thematically focused forums. More than 30 illustrated design reports and 40 videos document the process, events and stages of public engagement and response throughout the 18 month project and all remain available online at [5000plus.net.au](http://5000plus.net.au) Synthesizing all the contributions, deliberating and advocating with more than 19 government agencies, was (unsurprisingly) a significant task for a team of less than 10 people because: 'working in between many affected parties or stakeholders, planners and policy analysts face a pressing and central challenge of democratic politics: the challenge of "making public deliberation work", making participatory planning a pragmatic reality rather than an empty ideal' (Forrester, 1999, p3 with reference to Hoch, 1994; Healy, 1997; Gutman and Thompson, 1996; Benhabib, 1992; Bessette, 1994, p46).

On 18 October 2012 at the final public exhibition of the 5000+ Collaborative city work, the South Australian Premier, Jay Weatherill, said of the 5000+ project's approach, 'this method of engagement can be applied to the creation of all public policy, as it engages the breadth of knowledge in our community'. His endorsement of the engagement approach confirms the arguments made in this paper. It also demonstrates that citizens are not alone in calling for participatory processes of policy and decision-making, but rather that common aims can be shared. The

remaining challenge is for this aspiration to be implemented in everyday governance processes.

Designers' innovative methods for presenting a compelling vision of what is on offer and engaging in dialogue to describe and work through the everyday implications, offers a foundational common language upon which consensus for urban development proposals can be built. The iterative nature of engaging with a design process like the 5000+ project also creates opportunities for residents to influence decisions, facilitates contact between the city's stakeholders, and builds confidence of many participants in terms of their agency over local circumstances. Thus the process delivered upon the 3 important aspects outlined by Woodcraft et al through which having voice and influence can contribute to wellbeing. Let us now turn to the Intergenerational engagement.

### **Part three: The Value of the opportunity a design led process offers to engage across age groups**

One of the 5000+ forums (described above) engaged industry partners and more than 300 participants in propositions for making Adelaide more child- and youth-friendly. Of particular focus in that forum was the recognition of children and young people as citizens and welcoming them to participate in the decisions that will affect them, particularly those relating to the built environment. In addition to a two day forum, three pilot projects demonstrated the importance and benefits of engaging with young people; spaceshaper in school, spaceshaper in Bowden & project Tag and

highlighted the value of their insightful contributions.

*Spaceshaper* is a tool developed by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) in the UK to improve community engagement for performance analysis of public places. As CABE explain, 'Children and young people are often overlooked in community engagement, so *Spaceshaper 9-14* aims to get them involved in improving their local parks, streets, playgrounds and other spaces' (CABE, 2011, n.p.). One application of the *Spaceshaper* tool worked toward building capacity among primary-school students, in a manner similar to Diers' observation of asset-based community planning, as an emerging form of participatory democracy that 'transforms passive clients and customers into active citizens' (Diers, 2004, p14). In the second application, it was used to engage and elicit local knowledge in the process of writing a brief for the public spaces in a new development.

In the process of the '*Spaceshaper* in schools' workshops we began to build the capacity of these children to speak with confidence about the design of their environment. Landsdown provides reasons for the importance of this:

Children's self esteem and confidence is enhanced by participating in decisions affecting them. Participation provides the opportunity for developing a sense of autonomy, independence, heightened social competence and resilience. The benefits are therefore significant.

(Landsdown, 2005, p41).

Freeman reminds us that there are 'opportunities that the physical environment provides for planners and policy makers to engage with children and young people in

shaping their community environment in ways that contribute to their wellbeing' (Freeman, 2006, p83). Furthermore, the importance of this direct approach by children to their environment has led Freeman (2006) to emphasise the need to have a local perspective in planning and decision-making. Such new planning would, he argues:

involve and build on the understanding generated by those who have the most intimate knowledge of the area, and it will engage those who are most affected by the development and decisions. Benefits of a more inclusive system of planning accrue at three points: for children, for society and for the professionals involved (Freeman, 2006, p83).

The 'Spaceshaper in Bowden' workshops generated analysis of the site by locals of all ages to capture the aspects of the current site which were performing well and those that needed improvement. This information contributed to the writing of the brief which the design professionals could then work on. Endorsement of the value of this type of engagement of intergenerational participants in deliberation regarding urban design is presented Kaplan's work which presented program evaluation data from an intergenerational community service program called 'Neighbourhoods 2000', implemented in seven American neighbourhoods over a seven year period (1987-1994). He describes:

'The collaborative process, which takes place within a non-judgmental atmosphere of mutual support, teaches the youth and senior adults that they have something to give to society and that their views and contributions are valued by others. Both gain insights into community development issues as

they learn to understand and better tolerate differences in the community.'

Kaplan (1997 p 214)

And furthermore:

When project participants focused on the past, present and the future of their neighborhoods they were at the same time talking about values, about how to live. This type of dialogue was more of a dialectic than a linear disposition of changing values. As a result, some project participants learned to reassess their definitions of 'progress'; children learned that newer is not necessarily better, and older adults became more familiar with current issues related to sexual equality, technological development, and youth self expression. Kaplan (1997 p 225)

Part 3 (b): Value of a common intergenerational language.

At the 5000+ Child & Youth Friendly Cities forum, speaking of the value of a common intergenerational language, Dr Lucas Walsh, Director of Research at the Foundation for Young Australians, commented 'the common language is a real challenge, but it can elevate the discussion, what one might see as dumbing down or simplifying actually gets you back to a purity of discourse'. His call for a common discourse is in accordance with what Horelli calls 'child-friendly structures', which she describes as 'a network of places with meaningful activities where young and old can experience a sense of belonging whether individually or collectively' (Horelli, 1998, p225). These examples confirm my observation that through their participation in the

Spaceshaper in Schools project and their inclusion in the forum as experts whose opinions were taken seriously - it was clear the children's self-esteem, confidence and wellbeing were enhanced. Children need to be recognized as the experts on their own environments and their voices should be listened to and acted upon in the design and planning of community facilities and spaces (Howard, 2006).

## Conclusion

Citing Sen and Nussbaum, Sennett (2012, p292) suggests that 'people's capacities for cooperation are far greater and more complex than institutions allow them to be'. He goes on to describe how rich the experience of responding to others can be. This paper has demonstrated that a design process can be a method of dialogic discussion about our urban environments, what we value, what needs improvement and what performance aspirations we hold for public places. While design most certainly cannot solve all issues of public participation and power sharing, it can offer a transparent method for facilitating open and inclusive discussion and deliberation firmly focused on the outcomes of place. However, as Moody & Disch (1988) have noted 'when it comes to tangible public support and, more specifically, public funding, intergenerational programs are part of everyone's agenda and no one's budget'. And yet, speaking of the intergenerational community development program he ran, Kaplan (1997p 213) describes their importance 'As they work together to investigate and improve community conditions, they help expand each other's understanding of real societal problems and reconceptualise how they view their own role as 'citizens'. It is this promotion of 'the ideal of common citizenship' that Moody & Disch (1989) refer to as the most powerful legitimation strategy

supporting intergenerational programs. The complexities of contemporary urban challenges highlight the importance of citizen participation and cooperation. This paper has suggested that including of all ages in opportunities to participate in urban decision-making offers multiple benefits; during the deliberative process of engagement and; the quality of social investment; and the quality of the resultant outcomes.

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