Playful public space, young people and social sustainability

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Presentation focus on:

- **Conflicts arising over young people's use of space at two Sydney shopping centres and the lessons we can learn to inform future planning**

- **Look at youth needs of public space and the commonalities between their needs and other ages needs, and how creating more playful, shared spaces can contribute to the fufilment of social sustainability goals.**

Sydney context

- Increasing population and building density

- Australian Government endorsed New Urban Agenda, 2016

- Lack of public space and integrated precinct planning resulting in poor quality streetscapes and connectivity to transit options

Increasing building density and privatisation of land is eroding public space. Yet population growth and smaller living spaces means that we will need public space, more than ever!

In Oct, 2016, the Aus Government endorsed the UN New Urban Agenda which recognises the importance of high quality public space as a contributor to healthy cities and people - the need to create spaces that are socially sustainable - that are safe, inclusive, support diversity of social relations, spatially equitable, and include engagement with the community in the design and planning of our cities.

What can we see here:

The two large shopping centres are both adjacent to major transport hubs.

Both areas designed - little regard for safe connectivity to public space and transit stops.

Poor accessibility to poor quality public space (limited provision to meet people's needs, particularly a lack of appeal for young people)

Busy roads & rail separate the shopping centre from the public space
Dominated by buses, rubbish and delivery trucks, and taxis

Shopping centres built up to the footplate - like many they are mixture of retail, entertainment and service provision, they are almost islands and have had a deleterious effect on the surrounding area, not uncommon - but this makes the new shopping centres even more of an attraction.

So what's happening in these centres at a micro level:

Large numbers of young people come in to the shopping centres predominantly in transit on their way home from school. Often congregating around affordable eateries close to the entrance / exits, and close to the train station and bus stops, which creates tension.

Here: Just behind the glass doors is McDonald's and a Juice Bar, inside young people are queuing for food, hanging out….and when these photos were taken two security officers are watchful close by...

Outside some boys with their McDonalds are sitting in the café, but this seems to be ok (as in the cafe owner did not move them on, then a Boy bounces the basketball, lady in front bellows at him to stop - seemingly because she is there for a some downtime (although it is a manic spot - ill come back to this). The boy desists. The boy's play is curtailed, yet he is outside of the shopping centre so arguably it is public space so why does the lady feel she has a right to stop his activities?

Directly behind me is the road – with a main bus stop. On recent occasions the number of students has swelled significantly and fights have occurred.

Daily, children among others are narrowly escaping being hit by passing buses, especially if their focus is on their phones. Fights and large groups of young people congretating are also a concern at Parramatta.

Westfield (an Australian owned company with presence in the UK have at least since 2012 been working to minimise disruption by young people at numerous centres. Their position is that there should be more of an offer outside the centres to appeal to young people, yet….

Westfield works with Councils and organisations such as YMCA and YouthAction to provide opportunities for young people, and historically this has included...a number of basketball competitions, bbqs taking place once a week usually between 5-8pm in a nearby park or public space;

Individual security guards run fitness classes and breakfast clubs with youth who they perceive to be disengaged to try to connect them to services who may be able to to help them. Westfield have created a youth resilience playbook and youth strategies for their staff to manage situations - e.g. how to negotiate with young people in a respectful manner (afterall they are current and future consumers)...They have even engaged a behavioural psychologist to explore ways to engage and manage the issues related to people's use of their shopping centres.

One project has resulted in Parramatta Council creating a youth space in Library, next to the train station and shopping centre in order to minimise the number of young people hanging out outside. Jane Jacobs and Paul Friedberg identified 50 years ago, that teenagers like to loiter, I'm sure you recall doing it yourself but it remains that there is still a lack of tolerance towards young people's everyday activities in space.

The paradox - is that if young people's needs had been identified and valued during the planning of the shopping centre and surrounding precinct these issues may not exist, that is if money had been invested at the front end on engagement and establishing needs. Westfield role (I use the term loosely) **as a social service provider - and at a cumulative considerable cost – may also have been minimised**.

Children aged 0-19 in Australia make up 25% of the population - if we are to restructure our cities on SS principles - old and new developments and precincts need to be designed to include their needs too. Ensuring public space is sufficient in quantity and quality to meet projected demographics, will add social value as well as economic value and may minimise social conflict

over space.

Significantly, in Sydney **Greater Sydney Commission, NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment..... Strategic planning arm ....has outlined a major transit orientated development program including** identifying a number of Priority Growth Precincts (such as Parramatta and BJ) and new transport hubs with a mix of Retail, Business, Residential offers… It is therefore critical to ensure that these new developments avoid the scenarios being played out above.

How do we do that?

The expansion of a consumer culture can disenfranchise those with limited finances, as is often the case for young people. This has resulted in them being designed out of shopping areas. (Edwards, 2015).

The shopping centres are a community asset and destination, as such although private they are used and seen as public space.

Shopping centre design is shifting to a more 'open' and less box model, but often the surrounding and interwoven streets become privatised too.

Play Anywhere – illustrates the point Colin Ward, Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell have made that kids will play anywhere (given the time and space)…. But here the boundaries are blurred.. it appears to be public space yet they are constricted by the acceptable norms of what is perceived as a allowed in a retail environment.

Need to establish on a precinct level why yp / users want to be in one place and not another – why are they at this McDonald's over another close by….e.g. is it because the young people recognize and value the design quality of the place, over the other, or purely it's proximity to transit options.

Youth Needs

1. Increasing independent mobility - Easily accessible public spaces, central spaces to meet friends – inclusive, safe
2. Formative period – identity formation – social inclusion
3. Spaces to socialize, hang out, loiter, banter, jostle, cajole, adventure, impress others and flirt (Jacobs, 1961, 1992; Paul Friedburg, 1970; Edwards, 2015)
4. Permission to be – create a sense of belonging, attachment to place

We need to incorporate youth needs

Beunderman, Hannon and Bradwell noted that, "with limited independence funds and transport– children and young people depend on the public realm more than other groups" (2007, p.27).

Town centres are often easily accessible central locations for young people to meet their friends (Edwards, 2017). As are often shopping malls, and are also havens on hot, wet, cold days. YP want spaces where they feel safe, and part of the community, rather than ostricised from it (Chawla, 2002; Open-City, 2012; Edwards, 2015).

Adolescence is also a period of significant mental and social development. It is a time of risk-taking, challenge, exploration and increasing independent mobility (Clark and Uzzell, 2002; Driskell, 2002; National Institute of Mental Health, 2014; Blakemore, 2015; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC[b]), 2013[1]). the UNCRC identifies streets and public space as sites for self-expression, and important in the formation of young people's identity (UNCRC[b], 2013[1]).

Peer influence and developing a sense of belonging are critical issues as

teenagers, Blakemore, neuroscientist research proposes that "register the impact of social exclusion more acutely" than adults, (Blakemore, in Carpenter, 2015). Social networks, and environmental conditions are seen as contributing factors to an individual's mental health and sense of well-being, (UNCRC[b], 2008, 2013[1], 2013[2]; Lester and Russell, 2008; Edwards, 2015).

And, during this Formative period - lifetime patterns are formed - do we want to espouse a life focused on consumption!

Israel square, Copenhagen

On a large scale **this is more like what spatial equity can looks like**, Israel Square - public space incorporates playful provision, and is easily accessible to the Norrebro major transit hub, Copenhagen.

Market Hall admittedly not the same scale as Westfield, and residential buildings abutting the square.

The space provides multi-use courts with seating to allow passerbys, aswell as friends and family to spend time to watch the games. My visit - street soccer competition was being held. Skateboarding is promoted - no defensive architecture here, **architectural features are included to promote play such as cement balls**, different levels, also waterplay and different types of seating.

1. one of the first commonalities for different ages – that Public space provides an opportunity for both social **interaction referred to by social scientist ......Lieberg, 1997 (in Chawla and Malone, 2003, p.126), (Abbott-Chapman and Robertson, 2009**) **to as 'onstage', and space to retreat 'backstage' or 'prospect' and 'refuge'** (Appleton, 1975; Corkery, 2015).

Here you have a sense of **prospect** or outlook over the whole square, provided by the **pyramid type seating** – the square is also adjacent to a large park where refuge can be found easily and arguably the trees over the seating also become sites for refuge.

Commonalities of need - Pavilions

On a small scale - Pavilions appeal to all ages – long history of Pavilions (and again provide performance onstage or havens fulfilling the backstage need).

Picture on the right is a pavilion: stemming from the welsh Play Sufficiency Assessment

- It is the result of a practice-based research project 'Cocreating a temporary space to support the rights of young people' - a collaborative project including young people.

The young people identified that they wanted a place that was central, easily accessible, a place where they could be seen, where they felt safe, but that was also sheltered, so they had a sense of privacy, their own space, but one they also wanted others to share. Observations showed, 'The Platform' (the short name) was used/ by younger children and adults as an opportunity to climb and spend time, and generally muck around on!

Creating their own pavilion was not the initial objective of the project which was open ended but it was the outcome as a result of the engagement process. The yp identified they would like wi-fi and power to the site as they expressed a desire for performances to take place in the town as a means to bring the community together (Edwards, 2017).

2016 – MUF's Gainsborough Square pavilion developed out of action

research with different age groups – it is intended as a multi-use space - it has power to hold events such as film screenings – seating options - a place to hang out and socialise.

2019 - Kagerou village is a response to the restrictions placed on children in public space in Japan, the project created a number of pavilions by different architects to encourage children's play and curiosity.

If there is time I will come back to Block Party - Block Party – based on our pixel world that yp are so familiar with, it invites you to change and adapt it to your own formation, it is the antithesis of the do not touch white box art world – inciting you to play and have agency in space – encouraging the user to adapt space in the city (Edwards, 2019).

Another SMALL SCALE solution - Leveraging available assets – Manchester park (Edwards, 2015)

Using a tree to promote play is not new idea, but here - highlight its use by people of different ages.

The teenagers 'hang out' on it, chatting and using their mobile phones, younger children climbing and also hang out.

The trunk of the tree, is most often in a stationary position, and used as a seat. When the trunk is rolled away from the fence, it provides multiple affordances. Within the space of an hour I observed it being used by young boys to sword fight upon, then two men came to balance and play fight on it, akin Big John and Robin hood - evidence of adult imaginary play!

They were then joined by a third man, and then a child who grabbed a swing from them. Lastly a family came and placed a picnic blanket down and used the trunk to rest their backs, and bikes against, it framed their picnic area.

It exemplifies a low cost, small intervention to quickly increase affordances to

play.
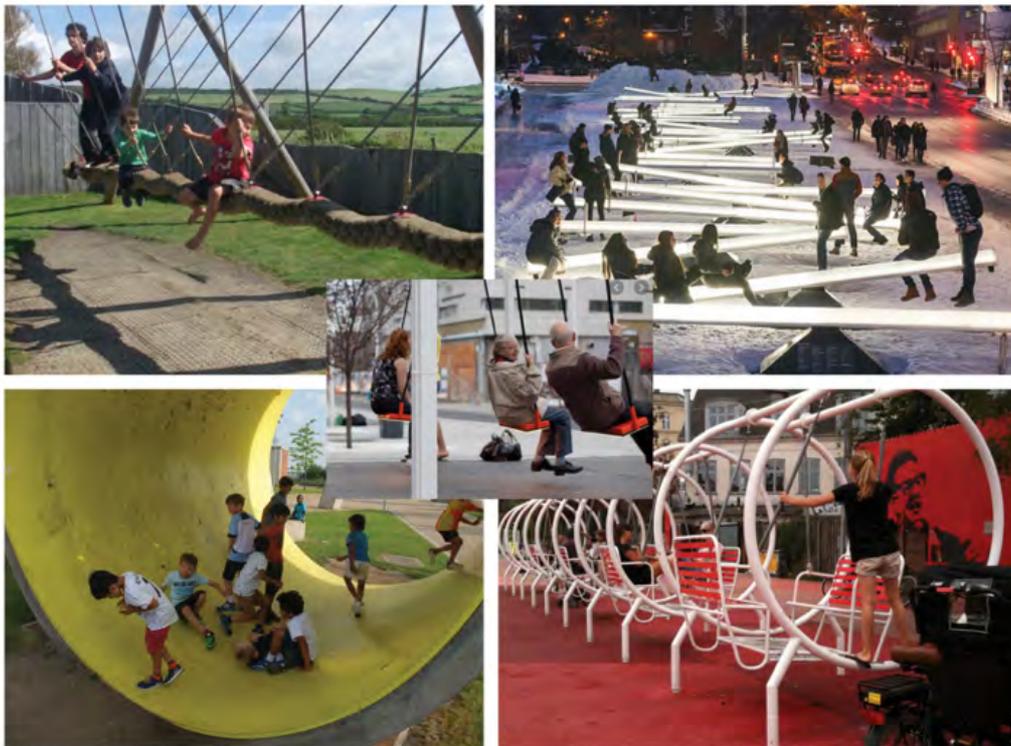
We like to play games- not pictured here (ubiquitous chess board, piano, table tennis, we also like to swing - all can promote interplay between ages.

Daily Tour les Jours - notable 21 Balconcoires – a swing that when operated makes a tune, and when operated with others changes the tune – making music together.

Top left: West Bay, Dorset, UK – playground project initiated and developed by children – funding gained by children and adults – children's objective was to a create playground to suit all ages – here the snake swing is used by different ages and works best with a number of people using it.

'Impulse' Navy Pier, Chicago. By Montreal based Quartier des les Spectacles, 2017 – Playful and being used despite the weather conditions!

A common drain pipe – fosters imaginative play – relatively accessible - and becomes a great hang out spot
The colour makes it a feature of the space outside Manchester velodrome –

Ah, Superkilen – here an imported swing design from Iraq – these swings like

the other examples are used by all ages as a space to socialise and play.

Seating provides a space to socialise and if the space works, linger, of course there are a multitide of seating options but we too often plonk a park bench in place.

Multiple seating styles can promote people to stay and here, space that incorporates the ability for active transit adds another dimensions to space adding vibrancy.

Dance is embedded in our cultures - a shift for dance in public space such as rock and roll and bebop activations.

Hip hop has its roots in the streets - we need space **to allow for spontaneous**, as well as formal, organised sessions and space to provide for performance and imaginative play – permission to comandeer space.

Pictured here: are from my observations of people using space to practice their dance routines, both male and females have adopted these spaces as their own, they don't appear to be looking for audiences just the space for freedom of expression.

We want climb and take risk - speak to Tim Gill our guru of risk - he's here!

Top left images: A result of community engagement among school students and architects Kato and Victoria to create provision between a school and youth space in Slangerup, Denmark. It also has Basketball, seating terraces, skateboarding …

Climbing space at the public space adjacent to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, it is not fenced it is not defined for use by a specific age but integrated in to the urban fabric.

Sculpture outside the Manchester Art Gallery and although not permitted it is used as a climbing frame and as a space to 'work out', in this instance pictured here are adult males.

Ninja walls and climbing opportunities are a recurring theme identified as desires in community engagement with children. One example of an easy solution is pictured here and integrated in the urban fabric!

Summary

1. Space in and adjacent to shopping centres is adopted as public space – to avoid the need for 'social services', designers and planners should apply social sustainability principles in precinct planning.

2. Public space is needed adjacent to shopping centres to provide safe connections to transit options, and to provide an offer beyond retail!

3. Community engagement is critical to identify future needs, ideas, acquire local knowledge of space, such as why some people use spaces and not others.

4. Different age groups have common needs of public space.

5. Integrating play and playful provision in the urban fabric can contribute to meeting social sustainability goals such as "physical, social and cultural spaces that support wellbeing" (Woodcraft, 2012), inclusivity and spatial equity.

Embedding social sustainability objectives in planning policy could speed up the process of making child-friendly cities a reality.

NSW Government policy "Everyone Can Play" doesn't include public space.

As of this year NSW has a new department Place Design and Public Spaces – the situation could be looking up.

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