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The “You’re Welcome” Project -

Designing an Age-friendly Public Domain.

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Introduction

“I don’t go to the cemetery any more; I can’t get on and off the buses”!

How often do we hear older people lament what they can do no longer?

“I don’t go to the theatre any more; I can’t climb up the steps”!

“I don’t go to the shops any more, I’m afraid to cross the road”!

We may all face these physical and mental barriers to our regular lifestyle, one day.

Yet, for the most part, the barriers are not of our own making. They are created by those who design, furnish and maintain the built environment. As the population ages the challenge for the designers is to re-create a public domain that allows people of all ages and abilities to continue their preferred lifestyle.

The 2007 World Health Organisation Global Age-friendly Cities Guide and Checklist identify barriers in eight categories of city living, as nominated by older people in 33 cities around the world. Six of the categories relate directly to the public domain.

Great advances are being made in the provision of facilities, assistive technology and services for older people, but what is their real value if they cannot be accessed because there is no continuous accessible path of travel through the built environment? What is the real benefit of providing accessible public transport if Bus Stops and Railway Stations cannot be reached? What is the real benefit of Universal Housing Design if we are making people prisoners in their own homes?

In Australia, the major responsibility for the design and maintenance of the built environment lies with Local Government. Using the tools and expertise of an Access Consultancy, the “You’re Welcome” Project is tailored to work with those agencies, and with local advisory groups, to identify physical, mental and social barriers within their areas of responsibility and develop informed solutions for their removal.

Background

Australia has the fourth longest life expectancy in the world, with 13% of its citizens currently aged 65 years or older (ABS, 2008). It is therefore important to design not just for those who are already aged but for *all* citizens so that, as they age in place, they can continue to enjoy their regular and healthy lifestyles.

In 2006, the Australian Department of Health and Ageing held a nation-wide program of workshops with the theme, “A Community for All Ages – Building the Future”. The aim was to identify a number of initiatives that would drive improvements to the public domain, for the benefit of all ages and abilities.

The Independent Living Centre Australia was a significant contributor to the workshops and ILC New South Wales obtained State Government funding through the Department of Community Services to develop a project based on one of the initiatives. The project, called “You’re Welcome”, is designed to help create a fully accessible, age-friendly environment.

The Project has three objectives:

- 1) To hold workshops with Local Government Authorities, businesses operators, shopkeepers and community groups. The workshops examine pictorial evidence of barriers from within the areas for which each agency has responsibility, and develop strategies for their removal to create a more accessible and *welcoming* environment.
- 2) To hold “Walk and Talk” tours through places or spaces nominated by the agencies, in company with one of their representatives. The tours allow the Access Consultant to demonstrate on-site how and why a barrier creates a difficulty, and to discuss informed solutions.
- 3) To produce an instructional DVD based on the “Walk and Talk” tours. The DVD will be available free of charge to all agencies. It will demonstrate how barriers can be removed by applying best practice strategies.

The target zone encompasses eleven Local Government Councils from the Region known as Western Sydney. The target groups include Councillors and staff of the Councils, business operators and shopkeepers, and community organisations that represent seniors, transport, people with disabilities and cultural groups.

The Project combines the tools of an Access Consultant (the Disability Discrimination Act, 1992; the Building Code of Australia; and Australian Standards) with the World Health Organisation’s Checklist of Features for an Age-friendly City; plus Guidelines produced by the Australian Local Government Association, a Guide for shopkeepers and business operators called “Missed Business”, and a DVD produced by the Centre for Accessible Environments in the U.K.

“Missed Business” was produced by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and Sydney’s Marrickville Council. It demonstrates how the removal of a step, for example, provides equitable access not just for seniors, but also for people with permanent or temporary mobility disabilities, plus parents with strollers and delivery personnel, and allows more customers into the premises, which, in turn, generates increased business.

The Centre for Accessible Environments DVD (CAE, 2005) demonstrates how Access Consultants apply their knowledge of the mobility and sensory needs of seniors and people with disabilities to develop informed solutions to access problems.

The involvement of ILC NSW in the “You’re Welcome” Project, with its collective expertise in Civil Engineering, Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy, has been a major factor in its success to date. So, too, has the fact that, as the Project is fully funded, its services are provided *free of charge*. Agencies are entitled to workshops and “Walk and Talk” tours, plus on-going liaison, all at no cost.

STAGE I

Meetings were held with the Aged and Disability Officers of each Council to gain an understanding of how the project might be tailored to their particular needs. The tailored presentations then focused on three themes:

- An examination of the greeting - “You’re Welcome”
- An identification of barriers within their area of responsibility.
- A review of their policies, standards and designs as they relate to the public domain.

Focus 1 - Many cities and towns display “Welcome to...” signs at their boundaries. The signs offer a warm, friendly greeting, but what do they really mean? Do they apply to everyone, including seniors and people with disabilities? Do they mean that you are ‘welcome’ if you can arrive by public transport, or if you can find a parking space? Do they mean that you are ‘welcome’ if you can navigate a barrier-free path through the public domain, or find street names or property numbers? And, if you can find the front door, are you ‘welcome’ if you can mount the front steps? Councils are urged to re-think the message that they hope their “Welcome” signs will deliver.

For example, the **Penrith Photo-Voice Project** represents a plea from a marginalized group that wishes to be ‘welcomed’ as part of the community. The project involves research by a Ph. D. student at the University of Western Sydney, assisted by a group of young adults who have mild learning difficulties.

The group was accompanied around the public domain in various forms of transport and recorded in pictures the social barriers to their safe and independent travel. The research highlights the growing heavy reliance on technology and text-based signage as a major barrier to the non-reading public. Their plight is exhibited as a powerful pictorial essay.

The **Tactile Street Name Sign Project** (Evernden, 2008) has existed for several years, and demonstrates how, with the assistance of a community group, a most ‘welcoming’ product was developed for citizens and visitors throughout the Central Business District of Sydney.

Street name signs are usually found on posts, walls and awnings, and sometimes on the pavement. But, wherever they are, they provide no assistance to people who have impaired vision. In 1992, Sydney City Council introduced a single design, which, although attractive, still provided no assistance to the vision-impaired public.

With the involvement of the Association of Blind Citizens, New South Wales, I developed a street name sign that can be read at close range by people with low vision, and touch-read by people with no vision.

Rubber signs were selected in preference to metal, wood or plastic as they provide the best tactility and colour contrast for readers. Metal surfaces can become very hot during a Sydney summer and wooden signs were considered to be easily vandalised. Plastic reflects light and blurs the message for people with low vision, and does not provide sufficient tactility for those who touch-read.

The yellow on black signs carry the street name and property numbers in raised lettering and in Braille. They are located adjacent to the Pedestrian Call Button on the right-hand side of traffic light poles, as the reader faces the kerb.

The Clarence Street sign in the photograph shows the numbers 239 – 177L, to indicate that the reader is standing in Clarence Street, in front of number 239, and that number 177 is to the reader's Left. The sign at the other end of the City block reads, Clarence Street 177 – 239 R.



The signs provide convenience and independence to people with impaired vision, older people, children, and people in wheelchairs. They also provide independence for people with speech or hearing impairments, who may not be able to ask for directions, or hear the answer. As Braille is an international form of reading, visitors who read Braille are able to find their way around the Sydney CBD, a most 'welcoming' feature. Perhaps, one day, similar signs may be found in other cities around the world.

Focus 2 – During the workshops Council staff are presented with a series of photographs that show barriers within their own areas. The reasons why the barriers create a hazard for sections of the community are explained and potential solutions are examined. The barriers are then inspected during the “Walk and Talk” tours and solutions for their removal are recommended.

“You’re Welcome” projects need not be extensive, or expensive. For example, parishioners attending a Community of Christ Chapel in Sydney had to negotiate a step onto a patio, then another step into the Chapel. Grabrails were placed for the benefit of older people. The small patio was used for morning tea after Sunday Services. The pathway to the Chapel was severely cracked. On a “Walk and Talk” tour, four options were presented to Church Authorities to improve access. Three options included the construction of short ramps within the existing space.

The fourth option, which was adopted, proposed that the patio be extended to replace the steps and the cracked pathway. This solution provided equal access, and a more welcoming entrance, for all parishioners, plus a larger area for morning teas.

To date, the engagement of Councils in “Walk and Talk” tours has led to the planning or review of several projects that are aimed at providing equitable access for people of all ages and abilities, including:

- A Council Customer Service Centre
- A Community Garden
- The development of a Town Centre Access Map
- An access audit of Bus Stops and Railway Stations

- An access audit of Shopping Precincts
- Promotion of the “Missed Business” program in shopping strips which are dominated by non-English speaking shopkeepers; and
- The review of Disability Action Plans

Focus 3 - Councils are encouraged to re-visit their public domain standards, designs and policies, to ensure that they comply with Australian Standards and meet current best practice that include worldwide trends in *Healthy Cities*, *Falls Prevention* and *Social Connectedness*.

The issues for review include:

Maintenance: In Australia in 2005-06 there were 35 recorded cases of falls from less than one metre that led to Spinal Cord Injuries (AIHW, 2007). About half of these cases involved people over the age of 65 years. As older people tend to shuffle when they walk, they are more likely to trip over very small defects in the public way.

Research by Monash University (VISU, 2008) found that, in the three years to 2006, 83% of all same-level falls by people over 65 in Victoria, Australia, resulted in hospital admissions, emergency department presentations or death. The need for roadway and footway maintenance is obvious, but good maintenance is actually an exercise in *Falls Prevention*.

Wayfinding: Signage and other identification and directional cues are important for everyone, particularly for people with impaired vision, older people, those with cognitive disabilities and visitors.

Traffic calming: The ability of older persons to cross roads safely is affected by diminished sight or hearing, slower walking speeds and slower reaction times. In New South Wales, people aged 60 years and over represent only 17% of the population, yet account for 40% of all pedestrian fatalities (ABS, 2008). Speed humps; chicanes; raised thresholds; and widened footways at corners all provide some measure of protection for slow moving pedestrians.

However, the designs of intersections, including those with roundabouts, often include corners with large radii. This means that kerb ramps and pedestrian crossings are located some metres back from the intersection, and out of drivers' vision. If corner radii are kept to a minimum, the speed of turning traffic can also be reduced to a minimum. Kerb ramps and pedestrian crossings can then be constructed closer to the intersection where they are more visible to drivers, and slow-moving pedestrians face a reduced risk.

Paving materials: Most paving materials have acceptable roughness coefficients. However, a problem arises when a material with a relatively low slip resistance value is laid adjacent to a material with a much higher slip resistance value. As a person walks from a rough surface to one with a much lower value there is a potential to slip. As a person walks from a surface of low value to one of much higher value there is a potential to stumble. This scenario is not uncommon in homes where an older person can slip when walking from carpet onto tiled surfaces, or stumble when walking from tiles onto carpet.

Bus Stops:

For many senior citizens and people with disabilities their path of travel through the day includes the use of public transport. In 2002, the Australian Government introduced Accessible Transport Standards, which require all forms of public transport and associated infrastructure to be fully accessible by the year 2030. Staged compliance is required, with 55% of all Bus Stops required to be fully accessible by the end of 2012. As local Councils are responsible for the provision of most Bus Stops, the “You’re Welcome” Project is assisting them to develop staged improvement programs to the end of 2030.

Street furniture: The location and frequency of public facilities such as seating, drinking fountains, telephones, automatic teller machines, bus stops and post boxes are important to allow older people to remain connected with the community, and maintain their usual lifestyle. Additional public seating, for example, is identified by the World Health Organisation as being of substantial importance for older people in maintaining community connectivity.

STAGE II - Community Groups

One of the sub-themes of this Conference is the need to involve older people in decision-making. This complies with the recommendations of the World Health Organisation, and with the principles of Total Quality Management, which propose that those people affected by a decision should be involved in the decision-making process. The involvement of community groups cannot be underestimated as their feedback is invaluable.

The second stage, therefore, has involved workshops with Seniors Advisory Groups, Disability Access Committees, Community Transport Groups and Multicultural Advisory Groups. These groups have been encouraged to consider two focus areas.

Focus 1 – Barrier identification.

As the eyes and ears of the local community, members of the groups are in an ideal position to advise Councils of existing physical, social and mental barriers.

Focus 2 – Informing decision-making.

As these groups are personally affected by the barriers, they are able to inform Councils of the reasons they create a difficulty. As members of the groups are also ratepayers, they can influence Councils to make informed decisions.

STAGE III – Local businesses

This stage is due to commence in October 2008, and will involve individual business owners and Chambers of Commerce.

Conclusion:

The “You’re Welcome” Project does not propose major changes to the built environment. It does not engage in urban design or seek to make major engineering or architectural decisions. Rather, it works with agencies to examine what already exists, and makes recommendations for improvements where appropriate, for the benefit of present and future generations. It also encourages agencies to review their own standards, to ensure that they meet current worldwide best practice.

The project presents a perspective of difficulties and barriers in the public domain, as experienced by people who are aged or have a disability, and seeks to develop informed solutions for their removal. The workshops and “Walk and Talk” tours have been invaluable in helping focus groups understand that elements of the public domain, which might have been tolerated in the past, may no longer be acceptable in a city that seeks to provide equitable access for people of all ages and abilities.

A project such as this, which involves personnel experienced in the needs of older people and those with disabilities, and which provides an awareness of access difficulties experienced by them, is recommended for agencies with responsibility for the design and furnishing of the public domain.

It is also recommended that agencies, such as Access Consultancies, who undertake such a project, obtain funding so as to allow activities undertaken by the project to be delivered *free of charge*. This enables the project team and agencies to engage in meaningful discussion and decision-making, without the incumbency of financial restraints.

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