

# Bringing Child Friendly by Design to the Heart of Liveable Cities – the Illawarra Experience (PEER REVIEWED)

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## ABSTRACT

*The Child Friendly by Design (CFbD) Project, conducted by Healthy Cities Illawarra (HCI), in conjunction with Griffith University's Urban Research Program (URP) has involved children, young people and families in the design and redesign of public open spaces in Shellharbour, a fast developing city in the Illawarra region of NSW.*

*Many conventional town planning processes do little to give children and young people a 'voice' on what is important about the places that surround them. The CFbD project has developed engagement tools, created participatory forums and linked closely with local government's planning processes. CFbD has placed children at the 'heart' of the planning and design process and has facilitated links between Council, developers, local business, families and the community sector.*

## Keywords:

child-friendly, participatory design, community development

## PAPER

The Child-Friendly by Design (CFbD) Project based in the Illawarra region of New South Wales, Australia commenced in 2008 as part of Communities for Children (CfC) Shellharbour, which is supported by the Australian Government Department of Families and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) Families and Communities Strategy, now the Family Support Program. Hosted by lead applicant agency Healthy Cities Illawarra (HCI), the CFbD idea emerged somewhat serendipitously when CfC Shellharbour called for expressions of interest in 2007 and HCI were able to capitalise on considerable work already underway with children and young people coupled with their significant investment in the World Health Organisation's 'Healthy Cities' initiative. Griffith University's Urban Research Program (URP) had also just completed a literature review on child-friendly community indicators for the NSW Commission for Children & Young People (Woolcock & Steele 2008) and were invited to provide research, design and evaluation expertise to the CFbD project, specifically drawing on the services of a skilled designer/architect and the services of an international expert in play space function and design.

From the outset, the CFbD Project sought to actively target key community sectors involved in the development and maintenance of built and natural environments utilised by children and young people, whilst also celebrating and promoting child and family friendly places and spaces that currently exist in Shellharbour. In its rationale, the CFbD Project moved beyond the task of defining what makes a child friendly space or place and pursued the actual

implementation of such places, through the planning, design and creation of liveable places and communities.

## **CFbD Rationale**

### *A. Child Friendly Community Frameworks*

Perhaps most influential in the formative parts of the CFbD Project has been the growing literature focusing on child friendly environments. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY 2006) has defined a child friendly community as one that relates to the following two broad principles: i) a community where children are valued, supported, respected, provided for and actively included and ii) is based on the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) charter, informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child, which guarantees various rights of every young citizen (see Malone 2006).

More specifically, compelling findings about the oversight and ignorance of children's needs highlighted in the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry (NSW Parliament 2006) into Children, Young People and the Built Environment provided further legitimacy for establishing a project aiming to actively involve children and young people in the adaptation and creation of child-friendly built environments. The NSW Commission for Children & Young People continued advocacy and research on this issue after the Inquiry, culminating in the publication, *Built for Kids* (NSW CCYP 2009).

### *B. Built Environment and Children*

Literature on the impact of the built and natural environments on childhood continues to escalate, fuelled by rising rates of obesity and mental health problems. Scholarly research and popular interest in children's health has continued into the twenty-first century, focusing particularly on the incidence of childhood obesity and the associated decrease in children's physical activity (see Gill 2007 and Louv 2009 for two of the most popular examples of these concerns). Responding to concern about childhood obesity, a growing range of studies has examined the links between children's physical activity patterns and built environment form (eg Richardson & Prior 2005; Davison and Lawson 2006; Cutumisu and Spence 2008; American Academy of Pediatrics 2009). Other investigations have pointed to an alarming rise in mental health disorders among children in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (UNICEF 2007).

While there have been important tributary streams of interest in children in urban scholarship - including, for example, the work of Tranter and Sharpe (2007) on children's rights, Malone (2007) on residential living and Walsh (2006) on play environments - this renewed focus on children's well-being and the relationship to the built environment is not well served by a developed urban understanding (see Gleeson & Sipe 2006).

It is only recently that the built environment has been recognised as an alternative intervention point for improving health and well being. For children and young people, outdoor environments are not just the typical places to play, but also provide a place to socialise, be physically active, explore, have fun, 'hang out', be in contact with nature, escape from indoors, or just be free from the encumbrances of an increasingly adult world. What the CFbD Project found to be unfortunate but true was that the vast majority of both the creation and adaptation of built environments occurs with a complete absence of children and young people's voice (Nordstrom 2010). This crucial background literature formed the basis for the establishment of the CFbD Project in the Shellharbour region.

## **CFbD Strategies**

The CFbD Project undertook a range of strategies to ascertain how to best influence more child-friendly environments in the Shellharbour region, and thereby work towards making a more liveable city.

### *A. Business Breakfast and Community Forums*

The concept of a child friendly place or space was a new one to most people in the Shellharbour LGA at the beginning of the CFbD Project. In order to raise awareness of what makes a place or space child friendly and harness the interest of key stakeholders for possible involvement in the CFbD Project, a Business Breakfast was held, targeting key decision makers from relevant sections of Shellharbour City Council (SCC), local developers, local members of government, Chambers of Commerce, local media, emergency services and health, and relevant government departments such as housing, community services, education and training.

Keynote speakers presented child friendly strategies and projects on an international and national scale, and proved to be a successful strategy in engaging decision makers from SCC, developers, the police service, Chamber of Commerce, and community and youth services, in gaining commitment and approval for people to become involved in the CFbD Project.

Following the Business Breakfast, CfC Shellharbour and SCC co-hosted a Local Government Planning and Design Forum, as well as a Community Forum, both with a CFbD Project focus. Each event successfully worked towards raising awareness of what makes a child friendly place or space with the progression to ways and strategies that could be adopted to practically achieve a more child friendly Shellharbour. This set a strong platform for the CFbD Project in not only establishing commitment and involvement of key stakeholders, but also in confirming project direction.

### *B. Regional CFbD Workshop*

In order to take advantage of the momentum gained through the Business Breakfast and Forums, a Regional Workshop targeting representatives and students from local schools, developers, SCC staff, community agencies and services was conducted. The 'Creating a Child Friendly Shellharbour Regional Workshop' was a practical, 'hands-on' day where students worked alongside developers, Council staff and youth workers to assess what makes a place or space child friendly. Children and young people were given a 'voice' during the program to give play spaces currently in Shellharbour a rating of child friendliness, using location photos and a PLACE assessment tool (see Project for Public Spaces 2008). Workshop participants also had the opportunity to physically assess a play area at the workshop venue, thereby putting the theory into practice. Participants were also invited to join the CFbD Advisory Group, to assist in the selection of sites.

### *C. CFbD Advisory Group*

The purpose of establishing a CFbD Advisory Group was to further the process of involving children, young people, community agencies and businesses, and community members in the planning and design of public spaces. Together with this rationale, the CFbD Advisory Group was to serve in the selection process of sites chosen for design and redesign in the Shellharbour area. In establishing the Advisory Group, it was essential that it be

representative of the Shellharbour community, so that a balanced assessment of nominated sites could be ensured.

Once established, CFbD Advisory Group members were invited to take a disposable camera diary of places or spaces in the Shellharbour area that should be considered for either greenfield design or redesign, using child friendly design principles. On presentation to the Advisory Group, each site was discussed on its merits, with a short list of possible sites resulting.

At this point, a CFbD Checklist was developed to allow each Advisory Group member to assess short listed sites based on a set of child friendly criteria, developed by the Griffith University team, using a simple three option (Strong/Medium/Weak) response sheet based on a range of criteria for each location. The CFbD Project team also met with SCC to discuss each of the short listed options in terms of viability, possible funding availability, and long term suitability to Councils management plan, to ensure that the Advisory Group could make an informed decision on the selection of the two sites.

Community consultation was also an important part of this process. Local primary and high schools were given the opportunity to voice their opinions on some of the possible sites, and the potential that redesigning these areas would have. Community members view points were extensively sought on what places they felt would be important to undergo a child friendly redesign, including the use of disposable cameras, distributed with instructions to take pictures and snapshots of the place or space as they perceived it, and to make some short notes to explain the shots captured. These photo diaries then became a valuable resource to be used in the discussion, assessment and planning for the future direction of the selected place or space. Information received through this process also helped in fine tuning the CFbD Checklist used to assess places and spaces.

The developer Australand offered two pilot site options, as part of their Shell Cove development, for consideration for the child friendly by design greenfield site. One of these sites, The Knoll, was selected, the highest elevated area of the development and with a stunning vista looking north and south of the Pacific coastline. In choosing this site, Australand confirmed that they would proceed with the site's development until completion.

The site for redesign, after much deliberation, was the Albion Park Community Precinct area. Many issues were identified at this site, part of an old manufacturing area of the Shellharbour region some five kilometres inland from the ocean. Together with a history of attempts to improve its suitability for the community, the Albion Park Precinct became the CFbD Project's most immediate challenge.

#### *D. CFbD Working Groups*

With the aim of giving children and families in the community surrounding each of the selected sites a 'voice' on what is important about these places and spaces, a CFbD Working Group was established for each pilot site area. People from a range of backgrounds, including children and young people from primary and high school age, who had an interest in making Shellharbour truly child friendly were invited to join the Working Groups.

The role of the Working Group was to provide input into the child friendly elements to be included in the site plan, offer constructive feedback, and act as a representative of their local community, consult and engage with people on what design features would make the site child friendly, and continue to update their respective part of the community as the design progressed.

A key factor of each of the Working Groups was the appointment of a chairperson from the local community, as opposed to one of the CFbD team members taking on the role. The Albion Park CFbD Working Group Chairperson was the manager of the local youth service, based in the Albion Park Community Centre, situated in the community precinct itself. The chairperson of the Shell Cove CFbD Working Group was the Project Manager of the Shell Cove Australand development, also a resident of the local community surrounding The Knoll site. Both these chairpersons had an existing identity and presence within their local community, had a working knowledge of the needs and relevant issues, and a valuable network to utilise for further consultation and communication of the progress of the Working Group.

Throughout the design process, the CFbD Working Groups became the ideas and engine room of the design and planning process. Children sat around the table with architects, council workers and residents and helped create a child friendly design for each of the two sites. This proved to be an extremely valuable and rewarding process for all involved, and ensured that the resulting designs and concepts reflected the views and opinions of the immediate community.

Once the site concept plans for the Albion Park Community Precinct were at the Concept Analysis stage, they were presented to Council at a CFbD Council Workshop. The workshop was attended by representatives from key Council departments including Community Development, Strategic Planning, Future Planning, Risk Management, Youth Services, together with the chairperson of the Albion Park CFbD Working Group, and the CFbD team and Healthy Cities Illawarra.

#### *E. CFbD Vision Workshops*

Running parallel to the CFbD Working Groups were CFbD Vision Workshops, conducted in local primary and high schools, as well as community based youth groups and other select community groups. The purpose of the workshops was to continue to give children and young people a 'voice' about the design of the places and spaces surrounding them, in particular, the Albion Park Community Precinct and The Knoll, at Shell Cove.

The format of the Vision Workshops provided an opportunity for direct comment and feedback on important aspects of the 'child friendly by design' capacity of each site. With no limit on what could be designed, a wide array of ideas and concepts were illustrated. Many practical suggestions, changes and additions were made in regards to the already existing Albion Park Community Precinct. These designs were then passed onto each of the respective CFbD Working Groups to discuss with the architect, and then translate into child friendly design features. This practice was extremely valuable for the architects involved, and provided them with a new practical, hands-on method of designing a child and family friendly public space.

#### *F. CFbD Community Consultations*

Throughout the CFbD Project, many different initiatives were used to consult with all parts of the Shellharbour community. Some of the strategies used were dependent on the type of group involved, so as to ensure that the feedback and ideas collected were accurate and representative. Consulting with parents of 0 to 5 year olds at the children's festival Kidsfest Shellharbour was an example of designing the strategy to suit the target group, involving the CFbD Project team asking parents and carers of young children what they thought made a child friendly place or space. Adults were asked to indicate on a map of the Shellharbour LGA what public places they often used, and why those particular parks and spaces were more child friendly than others. Young children were also involved by being invited to draw a

picture of a place they liked to play in or go to. Over two hundred adults were consulted and enabled a significant amount of information and feedback to be collected.

The Shellharbourkids website, [www.shellharbourkids.org](http://www.shellharbourkids.org) another project of CfC Shellharbour, was also utilised as an opportunity for community members to give feedback on creating child friendly places and spaces in Shellharbour. General feedback, such as what makes a place or space child friendly, was sought, together with the opportunity to comment on each of the CFbD pilot sites. Utilising this medium for consultation was a strategy that ensured we were attempting to reach all members of the Shellharbour community.

## CONCLUSION

At the time of writing, the CFbD Project awaits confirmation of further funding from the current allocation of CfC Shellharbour to press ahead with staged implementation of the Concept Plans designed for both the greenfield (The Knoll) and brownfield (Albion Park Community Precinct) sites. Several budgetary contingencies outside the influence of this CFbD project will impact on the feasibility of the full plans proceeding on a staged basis. Nonetheless, the fact that the CFbD Project has managed to reach a stage which in the words of the CfC evaluators has “gone well beyond expectations” is testament to the rigour and authenticity that has been placed in implementing participatory design principles.

The CFbD Project’s next phase will also be dedicated to producing a Resource Toolkit highlighting the strategies and tools employed through the CFbD Project to plan, design and look to create child friendly places and spaces in Shellharbour for other local areas to utilise. It is this Resource that will be arguably be one of the project’s most significant contributions, by demonstrating that it is possible to create a whole-of-community process in designing child-friendly spaces and places. The CFbD team believes that for our communities to become more liveable, they need to represent all parts of a community – especially those who ‘voices’ are not often recognised. Committing to multi-layered processes of community engagement cannot be emphasised enough and enable real children’s voices to be heard like nine year old Hannah’s:

*“I like a place that you want to be in, where you can have fun, play on things for all different ages...investigate...meet other families...where people can see you and you can see them...you can just have fun and be a kid...”*

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