The Child in the City's Play Space: Creating and Sustaining Child-Friendly Public Domains

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ABSTRACT:

From its spectacular origins as the host site for World Expo 88, South Bank in Brisbane, Australia has been redeveloped as an inner-city precinct that is highly attractive to families and children. Unlike its theme park rivals with their highly contrived and commercialized play environments, South Bank's success - with more than 11 million visitors annually - stems from its deliberative effort in creating and managing a public domain that is not only free but highly adaptive in the play, leisure and learning experiences it offers.

Referencing the South Bank exemplar, this paper examines the current disconnect between the planning and design of Australian cities and their public spaces in providing environments that not only welcome children but also establish social and psychological connections that stimulate learning and ultimately civic participation. Too easily, the public environment of many Australian cities uncritically fails to consider the child's experience of place and the critical opportunity that experience offers to shape an understanding of how children exercise their democratic rights and in turn accept their responsibilities as future citizens.

The rich diversity of children's experiences across the South Bank precinct, ranging from physical recreational participation to active involvement in the arts, are critically examined to assess how children's right to play and to participate in large public spaces are not only creatively generated but also sustained. South Bank conclusively demonstrates that children can experience and establish genuine connection with natural environments in the inner-city, a connection that does not necessarily need to be confined to highly regulated botanical gardens or sterile green spaces.

The paper will however, also assert that a key reason for the success of children's connection with South Bank is the facility's provision of security mechanisms and technology that ensure safety for children and families. Popularly seen as a critical inhibitor of children's rights to play and participate, security and risk management procedures will be highlighted with particular reference to child safety incidents in the South Bank Parklands and how these have been effectively managed.

The paper will also draw on relevant preliminary research commissioned by the Place Leaders' Association on benchmarking different public domains and other research conducted by the Urban Research Program Griffith University, on place-based indicators of child-friendly communities.

Reference Points:

- Children's participation
- Public domain design
- Right to public play
- Assessment of public domain's child-friendliness

Introduction

From its spectacular origins as the host site for the highly successful 1988 World Exposition, South Bank in Brisbane, Australia has been conceived, planned and redeveloped as a precinct that is highly attractive to families and children. As a major international event credited with giving global exposure to the capital city of Queensland on a scale previously not experienced, it is the social legacy of Expo '88 that 23 years on, continues to resonate with the next generation of citizens. South Bank today is Brisbane's pre-eminent public domain, supporting a rich array of civic and community events, cultural activities and visitor experiences.

Unlike its private theme park rivals with their highly contrived and commercialized play environments, South Bank's popularity - with more than 13 million visitors annually - stems from its deliberative efforts in creating and managing a network of high quality public spaces and facilities that are not only free but highly adaptive in the play, leisure and spontaneous learning experiences they provide. The plan at Appendix 1 illustrates the location and distribution of these across the precinct.

South Bank Parklands, covering nearly 20 hectares of a riverfront site within the central city, features a sub-tropical landscape which supports a rich bio-diversity of flora and fauna some of which are protected native species. While children's interaction with the Parkland's plants and animals is discreetly managed, South Bank powerfully demonstrates that children can experience and establish genuine connection with the natural environment and the ecology of the city, a connection that does not necessarily need to be confined to botanical or zoological gardens and other regulated public spaces.

Contrary to popular depictions of a vast, unpopulated continent, Australia is one of the world's most urbanized countries with nine in ten Australians living in the cities. Our cities however, have been developed in a very inefficient way and we are now paying the price. With rampant problems such as traffic congestion, housing affordability and a lack of community services in new suburban and periurban communities, virtually all Australian capital cities are facing up to the challenge of consolidating their sprawling footprints due to sustained growth pressures fuelled by a strong national economy and an ambitious immigration programme.

Australian city planners still look to Old World cities with their denser, heterogeneous urban communities to understand and appropriate those aspects of public space planning, design and use they see as being relevant in finding solutions to the problems they now face. In many cities, existing public spaces and parks are being redesigned to accommodate not only much higher levels of usage but also to perform new roles as multi-purpose spaces.

In Western European cities there is growing support for a movement that could best be described as 'green urbanism' (Louv 2008). This approach refocuses attention on urban ecology and the opportunity even within densely populated cities to not only preserve nature habitats but to also reclaim blighted areas and reinstate woodlands, meadows and streams. These areas, once established, have spawned educational and recreational initiatives resulting in significant social benefits to the adjoining communities and re-establishing the connection to nature.

As a contemporary, master planned precinct South Bank has anticipated this shift in both demand and use and created a public environment which not only welcomes children but invites their exploration of the structured and unstructured play experiences on offer. The enduring place making principles that have guided the precinct's development and public domain management have, since 1997, been consistently applied and the benefits of this tenacity are today clearly evident. Recent market research confirms this with more than 8 out of 10 of Brisbane's 2.5 million residents alone having visited South Bank in the previous 6 months.

Child-Friendly Public Spaces

Good public spaces exhibit common place attributes of social inclusiveness, egalitarianism, freedom of exchange, sensory stimulation and flexibility of use. A key test of the presence of these qualities is how children, who too commonly are regarded as a minority interest group, are attracted to and engage with the facilities offered. South Bank's enduring appeal to children and parents is achieved primarily through the variety of innovative play and learning environments it has created and sustains through its active place management practices.

South Bank provides clear evidence that a successful public space is inherently child-friendly, when it exhibits the following traits:

Character - A place with its own identity with the objective to promote place character by responding to and reinforcing locally distinctive patterns of development, landscape and culture.

Continuity and enclosure - A place where public and private spaces are clearly distinguished with the objective to promote the primacy of streets and the enclosure of space by development which clearly defines private and public areas.

Quality of the public realm - A place with a high level of aesthetic and functional appeal with the objective to promote public space usage and work effectively for all in society, including disabled and elderly people.

Ease of movement - A place that is easy to get to and move through with the objective to promote accessibility and local permeability by making places that connect with each other and are easy to move through, putting people before cars and integrating land uses and public transport.

Legibility - A place that has a clear image and is easy to understand with the objective to promote legibility through development that provides recognisable routes, intersections and landmarks to help people find their way around.

Adaptability - A place that can change easily with the objective to promote adaptability through development that can respond to changing social, technological and economic conditions.

Diversity - A place offering both variety and choice with the objective of realizing these qualities through a mix of compatible developments and uses that work together to create viable places that respond to local needs.¹³

A meandering bush stream, a rainforest, an interactive water playground incorporating sound and light, and a working maritime museum are just some of the diverse settings children find highly attractive across the precinct. These are complemented by a busy calendar of free events many of which have a strong active leisure focus in recognition of the need to support the state government's policy on reducing childhood obesity levels.

South Bank's many positive place attributes when considered in the broader national urban context are however, somewhat of an anomaly. There is regrettably, still evidence of a clear disconnect between the planning and design of Australian cities and their public spaces in providing places that not only welcome children but also establish social and psychological connections that stimulate learning and ultimately, active civic participation. Too easily, the public domain of many Australian cities but particularly their central areas falls short in considering the child's experience of public space and the potential that experience offers to shape an understanding of how children exercise their democratic rights and in turn, accept their responsibilities as future citizens.

The reasons for this condition are interrelated but stem primarily from a lack of concern for the interests of children at the formative stage of determining what role a city's public domain should necessarily support and what audiences it should engage. Designers, place managers and their clients still commonly approach the task without any meaningful attempt been made to consider the full breadth of user needs and as a result, they create or modify public spaces that unthinkingly have the effect of excluding children, or worse, placing them at increased risk. This failing is being recognized, albeit slowly, and its significance understood at a practitioner level but the clear onus remains on public and local authorities whose responsibility it is to address the needs of all citizens, to rethink current policies and practices.

Security and Risk

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¹³ By Design: Urban Design in the Planning System, Department of Transport, Local Government and Regions, London, UK., p. 4.

Juvenile crime rates and the incidence of anti-social behaviour in public spaces across all Australian cities are at unacceptably high levels. Australian Institute of Criminology statistics reveal that since 1997 Australian juvenile offender rates have generally been twice as high as adult ones (AIC 2011). The nexus between this negative trend and the design and management of the public domain demands greater attention from different levels of government and from different professions. Urban planners and designers can however, be much stronger champions of children's rights and needs in how they shape and then manage the urban landscape. Focusing exclusively on crime reduction in the public domain however, runs the risk of masking other important dimensions of children's experience and use of public space.

A key reason for the success of children's connection with South Bank is the facility's provision of security mechanisms and technology that ensure safety for children and families. Popularly seen as a critical inhibitor of children's rights to play and participate, security and risk management procedures at South Bank have in fact become crucial enablers for participation across the age spectrum and through to after-dark hours.

Children's Health & Wellbeing and the Urban Built and Natural Environment

Traditionally, community interventions to address perceived problems for children and young people have been targeted through schools, recreational settings, or families and individuals considered most at risk. However, it is only recently that the built environment has been recognised as an alternative intervention point for improving health and wellbeing. For children and young people, outdoor environments such as South Bank are not just the typical places to play, but also provides a place for children and teenagers 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. Outdoor environments are also increasingly important spaces in the face of a diminishing public domain and disappearing Australian backyards (Hall 2010).

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 2008 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 & Lawson 2006; Cutumisu & Spence 2008; American Academy of Paediatrics 2009). Few of these studies, however, focus on physical activity in urban public spaces and parks such as South Bank.

And 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). Most contemporary developed Western cities are hybridised landscapes containing surviving (frequently gentrified) historical accretions from industrialism, significant suburban swathes bequeathed by 20th century planned growth and new and emergent compact urban forms (including both brownfield redevelopment and a denser suburbia).

These contemporary landscapes are also marked by socio-spatial polarisation, revealed in the contrast between localised concentrations of poverty/exclusion and new spaces of affluence and selective inclusion, such as gated communities. Whatever the context, it is also unfortunately true 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).

How then to link the importance of children's relationships with built and natural environments and significant urban public spaces like South Bank? Talen and Coffindaffer's (1999) important children and environments research in the US tells us:

- children experience their environments differently to adults; their experience is high-personal. It is about 'texture and variety', rather than function;
- children prefer places that are diverse and accessible, with opportunity for social interaction, as opposed to homogeneous and isolated; it is about shared spaces;
- gender differences are important to consider; and that
- children tend to have socialised, commercialised view of neighbourhood rather than the naturalised world.

Other Canadian contributions have been highlighted by McAllister (2008) who argues that a community's design and land-use decisions have a significant impact on their physical, social and mental health. The four main issues discussed in her paper - safety, green space, access and integration – she believes "should be at the top of every planner's list in order to create healthy, child friendly cities".

Child-Friendly Urban Play Spaces

South Bank's popularity underscores the growing importance of safe and supportive environments able to nurture children of all ages with opportunities for recreation, learning, social interaction, and cultural expression, thereby promoting the highest quality of life for its young citizens. Building such environments demands embracing child friendly design principles. Play England (2008) has outlined in

its *Design for Play* resource what they consider makes a successful play space, including each of the following traits that South Bank's public spaces can, in part, lay claim to possessing:

- A space that offers movement and physical activity with the room and features that allow a range of energetic and strength building play experiences (for example Aquativity)
- A space that stimulates the five senses maybe providing music and sound, and different smells made by plants and leaves (for example the Rainforest)
- A space that provides good places for social interactions allowing children to choose whether and when to play alone or with others, to negotiate, cooperate, complete and resolve conflicts (for example Picnic Island playground)
- A space that allows children to manipulate natural and fabricated materials, use tools, and have access to bits and pieces of all kinds (for example the Beach) and
- Spaces that offer children challenge and activities that test the limits of their capabilities, including rough and tumble, sports and games, and opportunities to climb (for example Riverside Green).

Most importantly, Play England (2008, p.15) states that making a successful place involves adhering to the golden rule:

'a successful play space is a place in its own right, specially designed for its location, in such a way as to provide as much play value as possible.'

The *type* of space that we use in our communities is also important. Public space, which is different to our own backyards or school playgrounds, is in principle, accessible to everyone, regardless of where we live. Research tells us that the interactions that take place in public space provide a rich education for children in terms of the world around them, and the people who live in it. Places where children play are important social places, not just for children and young people, but also for parents, carers and the wider community. South Bank is an obvious demonstration of what Play England (2008, p.8) argues there should be places 'where children and young people can enjoy spending time, be physically active, interact with their natural surroundings, experience change and continuity, take risks in an environment where they feel safe and, of course, play – alone or with others – in a wide variety of ways'.

Gradually, the importance of play is being increasingly recognised as a fundamental element of children's wellbeing. Little & Wyver's (2008) comprehensive paper examines the current status of outdoor play in urbanised, Western societies such as Australia and provides a critical analysis of the literature to present a persuasive argument for the inclusion of positive risk-taking experiences in

children's outdoor play. Again, South Bank is challenged in this regard by sustaining the delicate balance between its provision of a range of play experiences whilst maintaining a sense of safety and wellbeing. There is certainly a diversity of play spaces within the South Bank complex but the precinct's planning - with an arts cluster at its northern end and recreational play areas towards the southern end - presents an ongoing challenge to ensure that children and young people's experience of urban public space is integrated and accessible to all.

Finally, perhaps South Bank's most significant test is its capacity to continue demonstrating how all its features and amenities contribute to sustaining its child-friendliness. The ongoing need for more nuanced and sophisticated means of place assessment that goes well beyond the basic measures of numbers of visitors (Woolcock & Steele 2008) is evidenced by South Bank Corporation's willingness to participate in commissioned and internal research on the performance of public space and how this influences its design.

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