

A Vision for Brisbane's Older People

Leaving home

The year is 2010. It's Seniors' Week in the month of October. It's been a dry, cool winter but now spring is in the air. You leave your home in the cooperative with a sense of expectation. Something is in the air. Sally waves from her front garden as you leave for the train. She's handling your mentoring duties at the primary school today. And later she'll pick up the grandchildren after school. They live next door, so it shouldn't be a problem for her. You'll reciprocate tomorrow at the weekly food production working bee. But mostly you'll work closely with Sally, guiding her a bit. An eighteen-year-old girl needs to learn about pickling eggplant and making strawberry jam. (And your latest newsletter certainly benefits from her desktop publishing lessons.) This has been a bumper year for the cooperative's 'edible gardens'. Everyone is working together to harvest fruits, nuts and vegetables. In fact, you speculate as you wait for the train, you're almost self-sufficient. Except for meat.

The train's on time but you aren't worried about waiting there alone. You helped to design the station and conducted community safety workshops for your neighbours. The seats are comfortably high. You can see all around the station. At Roma Street station, it's the same.

The monolithic building was redesigned in 2005, following intense lobbying from older people's advocates. Now it's safe, inviting and perfectly accessible. You have no problems with the level changes. You stop for a cool drink on the shaded outdoor patio before walking to the Fair.

You have all afternoon so it's a pleasure to mosey about, checking things out and talking to old friends. Visiting the stalls and displays at the Seniors' Fair, it's clear to see the strength and visibility of older people in Brisbane's community. You know (from your membership of several advocacy groups) about the success of this group. Brisbane's older people are being acknowledged for their contributions and Brisbane is now being hailed the "Seniors' Capital of Australia".

The Indigenous Elders' stall

Walking around the Fair this bright spring afternoon, following the dramatic parade this morning, you are struck by the wide diversity of this City's older population. Indigenous Elders led the parade and their stall takes pride of place in the Fair. Though small in number, they are great in influence. And the re-population of Brisbane by Indigenous people choosing to call it home is encouraged by government initiatives at all levels. Elders guide the intergovernmental Seniors' Policy Council and chair the Council's Sustainability Advisory Committee, bringing a focus on "caring for country" and respect for Elders into policy making. Indigenous peoples' traditional use of open space has been acknowledged through accords that protect their rights and provide safe and comfortable places for Indigenous people to gather in Brisbane's parks and public spaces. The Elders you speak with have distinguished themselves by bringing into mainstream Brisbane culture an appreciation of the Indigenous community's respect for older people and validation of their wisdom and contributions.

The Ethnic Communities Council stall

A similar flavour is communicated by the people you speak with from the Ethnic Communities' Council. Their Seniors' Advisory Committee has worked for over a decade with government, the private sector and NGO's to place multiculturalism and appreciation of difference firmly on the policy agenda. At this stall, Hrant, a retired Armenian jeweller, explains that in the 1990's, government emphasis was primarily on addressing the loneliness and isolation of older women from "migrant backgrounds". Now there is a greatly expanded agenda. And it celebrates the diversity and contribution that life lived "in community" can bring to a capital city. With Brisbane's newly invigorated respect for multicultural contributions, ethnic communities in Brisbane are welcoming a new wave of retired migrants. Thus, the Nalbandians from Adelaide's 200-strong Armenian community have moved north to a warmer climate, Hrant explains. The pilot project of the Ethnic Communities Council, now in its sixth year, is "Living Sustainably in Community". Designed and operated exclusively by older people, its initial focus is the dynamic cultural precinct of Brisbane's West End. Here, the Greek and Vietnamese communities have joined forces in a pilot project that blends the policy areas of sustainability, local self-reliance and the active engagement of older people.

Walking for Pleasure stall

The energetic crew from Walking for Pleasure (WFP) staffs the next stall. They too, have come a long way, Sandra explains. One of their members, a retired Council maintenance worker, chairs the Council's Public Realm Advisory Committee. The Committee recently received a National Award for Excellence from the Planning Institute of Australia for their (literally) path-breaking initiatives in increasing the legibility and accessibility of Brisbane's parks and open spaces. They have recently turned their attention to Mount Cootha and Brisbane Forest Park. According to guidelines set by the Council in developing supportive environments for physical activity by older people, the park's design and maintenance must now meet rigorous requirements regarding signage, orientation maps, accessible seating, water fountains, toilets, shade and shelter. A monthly safety audit, designed and conducted by WFP and funded by the Council, ensures that the principles of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) are followed.

Media and older people

After a spirited argument with a stall volunteer over the number of days it takes to do the Blue Gum Walk, you make your way to a stall with a banner reading "Media and Older People", staffed by Older People Speak Out volunteers. While you are talking to them about the trials of pushing for positive media coverage of older people, they tell you about the latest successes. Older people now feature as television newsreaders, in advertisements that promote their wisdom, abilities and experience and in a range of employment-oriented advertisements initiated by the Federal Government. Older People Speak Out can take credit for many of these initiatives, including successes in targeting major retailers in the Brisbane area to sell clothes that are more appropriate to mature and older women's (and men's) bodies. The public awareness campaign by the Body Shop in 1999 got them started: "Life's a Blast at Any Age," featuring an older person with a realistic body. The retail fashion awards, which began in 2002, have been a huge success. A completely new retail market is opening up, following similar initiatives by Brisbane City Council.

Valuing older people's wisdom

Another Brisbane City Council initiative is canvassed at the next stall "Valuing your Wisdom" which has been tackling discrimination in employment with considerable success. One strategy that has been in place for a number of years is getting retired workers to mentor both younger unemployed people and older workers facing retirement or retrenchment. There has been a dramatic rise in part-time work by older, retired people and surveys conducted by government and non-government agencies report that they have been wide-ranging and successful. This is one area where participation by older men has been particularly successful. In fact, participation by men in recreational and educational programs sponsored or auspiced by the Council has more than doubled in the first decade of the new millennium. This has been partly due to the Council's awareness that these programs must be tailored to the particular desires of retiring men.

Community health initiatives

*The next stall you visit trumpets Brisbane's successful community health initiatives. Working with Walking for Pleasure, the Council initiated a comprehensive program encouraging a wide range of activities for older people, building on the highly successful **GOLD!** (Growing Old and Living Dangerously) programs of the late nineties. These programs acknowledge the diversity and vitality of the City's ageing population. The engaging delights of a range of eco-tourism offerings, Permaculture and self-reliance courses, as well as more energetic pursuits for the fit and able, replace trips to casinos and suburban shopping centres. Statistics reveal that in Brisbane, rates of cardiovascular disease have fallen, apparently in response to the improvement of the public realm for incidental recreational use and the wide diversity of outdoor programs offered, many of which are targeted at specific cultural groups within the City. Rates of problem gambling among older people have also been declining over the past two years and it is thought that wide-ranging programs focused on isolated and shy older people who live alone, especially men, may be responsible for this encouraging development.*

Among the more contentious but nevertheless successful community health initiatives has been a public information campaign focussing on the growing problem of elder abuse. Prominent Australian media personalities have responded to the Council's initiative to bring this taboo subject out of the closet. The Network of Independent People (NIP), themselves survivors of elder abuse, made it their campaign, sponsored by the Council, to nip this problem in the bud. Educational campaigns have been conducted at all Brisbane-based hospitals, retirement villages, hostels and nursing homes and the program is set to extend to a range of service organisations with older members. Supported by the Council, three Brisbane-based insurance companies and Queensland Health, this innovative program uses Playback Theatre and psychodrama approaches to give

voice to those shy and inarticulate older people who may be the victims of fast-talking con artists. The video produced by NIP is showing at their stall. It illustrates typical cases of elder abuse and suggests approaches which older people themselves can take to address this problem. You speak with Maisie, aged 77, one of the NIP volunteers featured in the video program, who received negligent financial advice about her options after the death of her husband. With NIP support, she has managed to reinstate her independence, and the careless financial advisors have been added to the NIP Re-education List.

Older People's Technology and Information Online Network

The next stall, with its flashing screen and catchy techno music, draws you in. Members of the OPTION Institute welcome you. It is clear from their posters and brochures what OPTION means: Older People's Technology and Information Online Network. This group, represented today by six men ranging in age from 65 to 92, decided in 2002 to tackle the phobias and resistance which older people were developing in response to the new information technologies of the nineties. By 2003, the group was fully functioning, with start-up grants from State, Federal and Local government, to provide multi-level and multi-lingual training packages for older Brisbanites. On display is a Website designed and built by a group of initiates in a suburban retirement village.

This group has done much more than develop educational packages. Because of their lobbying, you are confidently informed, a wide range of technologies that served to mystify older people in the nineties have been redesigned. These include ATM machines (their design and re-location to reduce crime), telephone and on-line banking services, and web-based commercial enterprises. A major bank with a head office in Brisbane took the lead, piloting their TOP (Technology for Older People) Program. The OPTION Institute members acted as consultants to this innovative project. As the display material at this stall clearly demonstrates, these initiatives have also received acclaim from disability lobby groups both in Brisbane and nationally.

Caring for Nature

Finally, you make your way to the largest and most colourful corner of the Fair. There must be a dozen stalls here. Staffed by older people, the Caring for Nature stalls illustrate hundreds of ways in which older people can express their ethic of caring for Nature. A primary focus is the reduction of automobile dependence and the improvement of public transport to reduce pollution and increase mobility of older people. The arguments in favour of less reliance on the personal vehicle are hammered home by Bob, aged 80, a former taxi driver and long-time activist for environmental causes. He explains that, while a high proportion of older people do have driver's licenses, many would prefer to take the bus or train because it's more relaxing and they don't have to worry about parking. The social and the ecological come together in the public transport debate, clearly spelled out in the posters that show the improvement in Brisbane's automobile dependence since the City's Sustainability Advisory Committee took on three feisty elderly members in 2001.

But there's more to Caring for Nature than taking the bus, Bob admonishes. It's about where you shop and where the food you buy is grown and manufactured. Older consumers have been placing demands on manufacturers and retailers to explain where their products come from, pressuring them to sell more locally grown food. And now that the older population is beginning to reach the peak of its post-retirement buying power, these voices are really being listened to. Consumer groups now seek advice from Caring for Nature on a wide range of issues from packaging and waste management to additives, allergies and the transport of food. Several successful lobbying groups called a boycott on major food retailers when Caring for Nature revealed that milk sold in their supermarkets had been transported from dairy farms in southeastern Victoria.

Caring for Nature, in collaboration with the Housing Industry Association (HIA), Brisbane City Council and neighbouring governments, has succeeded in encouraging three retirement housing developers (including a major national housing developer) to use energy-efficient and healthy house guidelines in the design of their retirement villages. Winner of the 2007 HIA Award for Housing Excellence, Clearwater Co-housing incorporates these guidelines and provides a wide range of gardening and recreational opportunities on-site for up to 120 residents. The unique co-housing development was designed using participatory techniques. As a result, the residents managed to consolidate many facilities, which would normally be built into each dwelling. Shared laundries, tool sheds and kitchens all result in less energy consumption and more social interaction for residents.

A focus on local self-reliance and urban villages has been encouraged by the Caring for Nature group, but only insofar as these initiatives do not result in any cocooning of older people.

Remember, Bob warns, "We're after independence. We don't want to be locked into a 'local' area with no chance of effecting wider change. We want to shake the world, not just our suburb!"

The Brisbane City Council

The role of older people in making decisions that influence their quality of life is clearly explained by the people staffing the next stall. This is the Brisbane City Council stall. Here Council community development and social policy workers, along with some elected members and their older colleagues, explain the role of the Council in encouraging older people into more formal political structures within the Council, as well as advisory committees and lobbying groups. A program established in 2003 to mentor older people to become local politicians is bearing fruit. Ting Heng is the first older representative—a teacher's aide from Darra. The employment of older people to work within Council on programs for older people has meant that social justice issues are more firmly on the political agenda than ever before. In the past, older people often relied on what seemed to be the generosity of the Council and its officers and elected members to provide the necessary services. Now, their daily presence and political influence ensures that these needs are in the forefront of everyone's minds when policy decisions and budget allocations are being made.

After the Fair

Having spent an exciting afternoon at the Seniors' Fair, you retire for a rest a short distance away in a café. George, an older man, serves you, explaining that he has had this part-time job for the three years since he retired. He likes working Sundays, he says, and many of the younger employees like their weekends off. "What do you think of the new seating?" he asks you. "Our committee designed it. We had to replace a lot of that seating that was so uncomfortable. And now it's all either in the shade of a tree or under an awning. The safety audits we do monthly helped us with some of the design options." George was a welder until he retired. Now he's a part-time coffee-shop employee, a safety audit specialist and a designer of mall furniture. During the week, he volunteers for NIP. After his nephew tried to get him into that retirement village with the dodgy financial package, he began looking for other people in the same boat. People who have been conned. He was lucky: he escaped. He spends most of his time on the telephone hot line but will also do occasional house calls. "NIP is a very busy place," he assures you.

Who are these older people you ask yourself. A mixed bag, to be sure—diverse, feisty and assertive. They have specific problems and needs. They are wise and confident in their ability to address problems, while at the same time mindful that more shy, isolated and vulnerable peers may need special support and targeted programs. Older people like to be independent and have services and facilities close to home—the urban village concept the planners talk so much about. But they also want to be part of the wider social world. That's what social capital is about, you remind yourself: relationships of trust with strangers. So what about those older volunteers and workers inside the Council? Their job is to help everyone working for older people to expand their mental horizons. To see older people for who they are, not just the labels we sometimes put on them. They are our wisdom and our conscience in many ways. They are a powerful consumer group. And their ethic of caring for Nature is helping to make our City a more responsible part of the global community.

Through their own networking and information technology, Brisbane's older people are part of that global community. They understand, better than most of us, the interconnectedness of life, the fragility of it all.

Most of all, they are clear about one thing: They want to leave a better Brisbane to their grandchildren than the one they inherited from their parents.

You sip your coffee and turn to look back at the Fair. Things are just winding down for the day and a band is warming up for the night's entertainment. And what a night it will be, too. It was a coup to get Midnight Oil. That Aboriginal Elder, your aunty, she clinched it.

The people gathering for the celebrations: look at them all. A tapestry of colour, wisdom, ingenuity and hope. Your people. In your country.

Not a blue rinse among them.

Caveat: Older people in Brisbane in 2010 are a force buoyed by the strength of ten exhilarating years of successful campaigning. Grey is in. Ignore them at your peril!