

An inclusionary model for community consultation

By Dr Wendy Sarkissian

The consultation practice used for Mirvac-Fini's development at Kennedy Bay, sets a leading practice benchmark for Western Australia and is based on extensive research in community engagement. In particular, the consultation process reflects a model called *inclusionary argumentation*.

In the past, developers and other proponents of change involving planning and development in Western Australia have found *formal* processes attractive because, among other things, they reduce ethical dilemmas. Patsy Healey, a leading UK planning theorist, argues that while all political structures embody principles of ethical conduct, some of the more formal arenas and processes may be dominated by particular ways of thinking and ways of organising which have inhibited stakeholder voices and constrained the development of new ideas (Healey, 1997: 269). To overcome this potential problem, the process selected for Kennedy Bay employed a range of established and innovative techniques.

The prevailing approach to community consultation in Western Australia could be described as "corporatist" a model that often includes only self-selected key players. The inclusionary model we have selected seeks to identify those who could have a "stake" in any situation and casts the net as widely as possible. It is generally accepted in participation practice that there is no objective way of identifying the "universe" of stakeholders, still less of getting access to them. Healey argues that "the politics of voice and reliance on existing organized groupings leaves out those that are silent in public arenas, and those who may have a stake but do not really realise it (Healey, 1997: 270-271).

Another characteristic of the prevailing approach is called **instrumental rationality**. In this systematic model, technical 'experts' undertake analytical and evaluative work in their offices, relying on a scientific or technological approach, where the goals express the ends of strategies and analysis works out the most appropriate means (Healey, 1997: 249). One of the defining characteristics of this model is the separation of discussion of "facts" from the discussion of "values". This fact/value separation also encourages a separation of the activity of technical analysis (the province of experts) from that of setting values (seen as the province of politicians representing the "public interest") (Healey, 1997, 249).

The problems with this model have been identified by many practitioners and scholars, including Leonie Sandercock. Sandercock, arguably Australia's most distinguished scholar of urban planning,¹ has focussed particularly on epistemological issues that is, approaches to ways of knowing. She would agree with Healey (1997: 252) that "the model represents a technocratic model of social engineering, in which planning is thought of as if it were an objective science." Sandercock's epistemological critique, which she humorously describes as "Cartesian anxiety", focuses on the separation of fact and value, the objective of scientific understanding and what Healey calls "the dominance of instrumentality" (Healey, 1997: 251). For the purposes of this report, it is necessary only to point out that these ontological and epistemological premises have dominated thinking about planning and community consultation in Australia and Western Australia for decades. To be including the voices of children and allowing the wider community to engage with the analysis of experts about scientific "facts" is to radically depart from accepted consultation practice. The approach described in this report is consistent with leading practice elsewhere but is nevertheless a landmark process for developers in Western Australia.

Despite reluctance from many sides, community consultation now has an established mandate within the policies and protocols of the State Government, as explained below. This report and the processes it describes offer an alternative approach, which is described in the professional literature as "inclusionary argumentation" (Healey, 1997: 249). As Healey explains, the idea demands "a broadly-based social technology of strategy production. The focus is on the process through which participants come together, build understanding among themselves, and develop ownership of the strategy, rather than the specific production of decision-criteria or an attractive image" (Healey, 1997: 249).

¹ Other critics include John Forrester, Judith Innes, John Friedman and Patsy Healey.

This is exactly what the process described below aimed to do: through wide inclusionary processes, to help participants working together to build an understanding of the scope and dimensions of the Kennedy Bay redevelopment project and to develop ownership of the emerging strategy. Ongoing mechanisms were put in place to ensure that specific criteria would be developed to assess the emerging plans. However, given the chequered history of the project to date, the judgement of the social planning consultants was that the most critical step that needed to be undertaken was one of community development.

The elements of the inclusionary model

The inclusionary model for community consultation processes is based on four key propositions, which are set out below, followed by a number of guiding principles.

1 Accept that there will be fractures and chasms and work with them

All analysts of community consultation agree that communities often contain deep fractures and chasms which represent realms of disagreement, cultural difference, struggle and misunderstanding. These are often related to experiences of breaches of trust and betrayal in the planning process. It is not possible to “paper over” these cracks. Rather, collaboration needs to occur in social relationships whereby people acquire different frames of reference and develop systems of meaning. This work also involves struggle within power relationships as people attempt to create new relationships of collaboration and trust and shift power bases. This is time-consuming work and must be treated with extreme care.

2 There is no privileged, correct rationality

As the study below reveals, there is a place for expert knowledge and there is a place for practical consciousness and local knowledge (Healey, 1997: 264). However, it is important to emphasise at the outset that the “expert” view should not be given higher status in collaborative discourse. In the process described below, we attempted to marry the “objective, scientific facts” determined by expert scientists and environmental advocates with the views of local people regarding what they valued in the natural environment of Kennedy Bay. While this process was less than totally successful, it did provide the beginnings of a model whereby scientific and environmental information can be treated as values and not primarily as facts.

3 Consensus cannot be uncovered; it has to be created

Collaborative dialogue cannot uncover consensus. Wide practical experience reveals that there is no objective “answer” lying hidden in the minds of community members that need only be unearthed for consensus to be achieved. Rather, as Healey wisely points out, consensus “has to be actively created across the fractures of the social relations of relevant stakeholders” (Healey, 1997: p. 264). Such work builds the capacity of the community and of the proponent, not only through its impact on participants but by means of its impact on institutions.

4 A new discourse needs to be created

In inclusionary strategic discourse, story lines develop where there are parts for most people. Many can play a part in a multifaceted process. Some suffer more and some benefit more as the story proceeds (Healey, 1997: 278). An inclusionary model recognises the role of discourse — that is, the languages used and the stories told — in the consultation process. As the Kennedy Bay story reported in this report reveals, a history of “broken promises” plagued the original proposal. The inability of the original developers to produce the expected infrastructure (in particular the marina) meant that some local people were severely financially disadvantaged. John Forester (1993), who coined the phrase, “listening is the social policy of everyday life”, argues that an inclusionary approach demands explicit attention to those whose needs have been neglected, to what cannot be achieved, what the costs of this may be and for whom, as well as what can be done. Healey points out that, from an inclusionary planning perspective, “the work of discourse creation is therefore both the most important and

the most dangerous part of the process” (Healey, 1997: 278). Not surprisingly, developers and their technical advisers often shy away from the deeper aspects of discourse creation.

Guiding principles for an inclusionary model

The community consultation process described in this report followed a number of guiding principles that have been used by Sarkissian Associates Planners for the past 20 years. They reflect the principles of the inclusionary model and are consistent with principles embodied in the WA Consultation Strategy and the WA State Sustainability Strategy.

- INCLUSION: Cast a wide net
- TIMING: Provide plenty of time and create appropriate timing
- RESPECT: Practice respectful listening and speaking
- INTEGRATION: Take a holistic approach
- PROCESS TRANSPARENCY: Speak openly about ethics
- ACCESSIBILITY: Use different arenas
- COMMUNICATION: Pay attention to language
- OPENNESS: Keep things open
- TRUST: Build and sustain relationships
- INFORMATION TRANSPARENCY: Keep the information flowing
- REFLEXIVITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: Engage in evaluation and regular reviews
- TRANSFORMATION: Look for the discursive key
- PROFESSIONALISM: Hold yourself to a high standard

Guiding principles of an inclusionary model

The community consultation process described in this report aligns with guiding principles employed by Sarkissian Associates Planners for the past twenty years. They reflect the principles of the inclusionary model and are consistent with principles embodied in the Western Australian Consultation Strategy (2002) and the Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy (2003). They are summarised below.

Principle 1 INCLUSION: Cast a wide net

In an inclusionary model, it is essential to ask, as processes are being designed, “Who are members of the stakeholder community? How are they to get access to the arena in such a way that their points of view can be appreciated as well as their voices heard? And how can they have a stake throughout the process?” (Healey, 1997:271). Leading practice consultation attempts to involve *all* individuals and groups who may be affected by a decision. Particular attention should be paid to those individuals and groups which are often systematically marginalised from decision-making: children, young people, people for whom English is a second language, people with a disability and Indigenous people.

In paying attention to matters of representation, it is also important to pay attention to how members of the stakeholder community are “called up” as the discussion proceeds. This is because participants have to do much more than just “represent the stakeholders”. As planning theorist Patsy Healey and others point out, ultimately “a few will play key roles in shaping discussion, sorting out arguments and developing a strategic discourse. This does not mean that others are inevitably marginalized” (Healey, 1997:274). We know that people acquire their own frames of reference and systems of meaning through participation, but however energetically the opportunity to “give voice” is pursued, some will be more actively involved than others.

Principle 2 TIMING: Provide plenty of time and create appropriate timing

The saying “time is money” is well known in both political and property development circles. However, in consultation practice, it presents as skewed version of reality. Inclusionary processes require time and more time

than developers, proponents and governments often prefer. This does not *always* mean that they cost more money, particularly when social and ecological externalities are taken into account. Further, as the American consultant firm, Interaction Associates (www.interactionassociates.com) point out, non-collaborative non-inclusionary processes can lead to increasing lengths of time and costly delays. Thus, it is important that consultation processes allow enough time for all participants to be involved. Importantly, different cultural communities—notably Indigenous Australians—often have different conceptions of and relationships to time. It is important, therefore, to be sensitive to the community time frames, as well as commercial and political ones.

Another first principle regarding timing within an inclusionary model is that public involvement must be sought *before* a decision has been reached. Each stage of consultation should give participants adequate time to receive, integrate, reflect and respond to information. It is also critical that momentum not be lost and that feedback from respective stages happen as quickly as possible. For participants whose lives will be affected by the subject of a given consultation, it is simply unfair to “leave them hanging”. Wide experience has taught us that rushed timetables are always met with suspicion. A little more time spent demonstrating openness and building trust always pays off in the long run.

Principle 3 RESPECT: Practice respectful listening and speaking

What characterises an inclusionary model of participation is an emphasis on respectful speaking and listening to encourage mutual listening through the dialogical process. While this approach is generally regarded as “business as usual” elsewhere, such intensive facilitation is relatively rare in developer-initiated projects in Western Australia. This principle involves the facilitators and proponents in engaging in listening deeply to the words of community members, trying to hear what is underneath their expressed views and doing so in a way that helps build consensus particular to the specific time and context. Such “situated learning” requires a particular ethical stand. It involves listening for more than content and interests; one must also listen for values and cultural references.

Principle 4 INTEGRATION: Take a holistic approach

In an order for any system to be sustainable – even a consultation process – it needs to be considered holistically. As mentioned previously in this report, consultation processes can be used towards sustainable development and particularly complements the social aspect of sustainability. Social systems, like ecosystems, have multiple layers and components. However, in a holistic model, *all* the components of a system need to be considered together, as well as individually. Equally, these principles combined equal more than the some of their parts.

Principle 5 PROCESS TRANSPARENCY: Speak openly about ethics

Planning theory increasingly focuses on ethical matters, partly in response to what some have called “a moral vacuum”: planning’s avowed commitment to objectivity, rationality and detachment (Sarkissian, 1996). This inclusionary moral sense requires those designing and managing consultation processes to maintain close scrutiny of the ways that power is exercised. By including a consideration of ethics in a consultation process, the result can be the transformation of policy discourse (Healey, 1997:267-268).

Principle 6 ACCESSIBILITY: Pay attention to the “rituals of discussion”

American planning analyst John Forester uses the term “the rituals of policy discussion” to describe the many processes employed in the facilitation of community consultation. It is important to pay attention to how people prepare themselves, how rooms are arranged, how communicative routines are set up (who speaks when and how) and how discussion is concluded.

In an inclusionary model, the “where” of strategic discussions needs particular attention. It is important to use different arenas – ranging from formal to informal – in order to make processes comfortable, convenient and

accessible to a range of participants. Further, a consultation processes may use different arenas at different times. It is also vital to include a range of different processes. Conservative or traditional consultation processes generally rely on a limited range of information, consultation and participation methods. There are few colours in the paintbox of some practitioners and many proponents. By offering a range of activities and levels of participation, skilfully integrated, the process can be more accessible to a wider range of people.

Principle 7 COMMUNICATION: Pay attention to language

Increasingly, planning theory considers the effect of the various “languages” that people use on their ability to communicate about issues and build consensus. An inclusionary model necessarily involves participants from different backgrounds. These differences impact upon the languages that people use and, subsequently, the frameworks through which they perceive a given situation and the choices they make. Much policy information is generally discussed in “the language of consequences, grounded in economic reasoning or scientific evidence” (Healey and Hillier, 1995, cited in Healey, 1997:274). For example, the language of finance and development is often the preferred mode of communication for the developer and their expert consultants. Planners have other languages, many of which serve to confuse rather than communicate. For some members of the community, the language of belief or the political assertion of rights may be more comfortable, while others may be more comfortable with the expression of fears and dangers. Healey suggests that the “challenge” in an inclusionary model “is to accept them all, but to recognize that translation between them is a complex, delicate and powerful task....” (Healey 1997:274). Exclusionary language must be avoided at all costs in public forums.

Principle 8 OPENNESS: Keep things open

While it may seem frustrating to those who aim to achieve an outcome as quickly as possible, initial discussion in consultation processes needs to be open and fluid, focused on the construction of meaning rather than a particular outcome. Then, as participants develop confidence in talking and listening to each other, it may be necessary to move to more formal arenas. This is described as moving from discursive “opening out” to consolidation around particular ideas and consequential actions (Healey, 1997:272):

The challenge for an inclusionary approach . . . is to experiment with, and test out, strategic ideas in initially tentative ways, to ‘open out’ possibilities for both evaluation and invention of better alternatives, before allowing a ‘preferred’ discourse to emerge, and ‘crowd out’ the alternative (Healey, 1997:278).

In facilitation training terms, this same progression is referred to as an initial process of divergent thinking, followed by the “groan zone” of convergent thinking and decision-making. Again, the style and ethics of the discussion setting are critical in an inclusionary approach, as they enable “awareness of the stakeholder range to be sustained throughout the process and also maintain opportunity for the assertion of all stakeholder claims for attention” (Healey, 1997:272).

Principle 9 INFORMATION TRANSPARENCY: Keep the information flowing

Information flow is vital to inclusionary consultation. The more open and transparent a process is, the more useful it can be. This means that participants need to be appropriately informed of opportunities and constraints so that they can form knowledgeable opinions and seek useful areas of consensus or dissent. For community members to build their understanding of the complex components of any planning or development process, there must also be regular opportunities to review information *as it emerges*. While it is unlikely that the same people will continue to be involved at all stages, advisory bodies can review emerging plans and their members can communicate back to their individual constituencies.

The inclusionary focus on information flow does not only benefit community participants. Staying open to information coming in from community members and other stakeholders helps to build the institutional capacity of the proponent, government and other relevant agencies. In this way, proponents can expand the limitations of their “expert” knowledges and come to understand planning and development issues from the enriched

perspective of community members. This has the benefit of greater general understanding of the plan and its implications, hopefully leading to a minimisation in interpretive distortion and to better development decisions.

Principle 10 REFLEXIVITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: Engage in evaluation and regular reviews

In the past the so-called consultation process for planning and development projects repented what could be called a “rationalist methodology”. Within this model, review was understood as “monitoring” which assumes a final and inflexible consultation outcome that is retrospectively monitored to ensure that it is implemented. While this approach may be important, it alone does not reflect a leading practice approach to consultation. Current participatory planning literature identifies three types of evaluation, each with a different purpose:

- **Summative or outcome evaluation**, which aims to ensure accountability at the completion of a process by judging its effectiveness according to some predetermined criteria;
- **Formative evaluation**, which aims to provide ongoing information for refining and improving consultation processes as they occur; and
- **Evaluation which contributes to a general body of literature**, rather than project-specific knowledge, on consultation processes and factors which affect them (Cameron and Johnson, 2003).

Because of our commitment to reflective practice, we have chosen formative evaluation as the model for this study, for the reasons outlined below.

“Evaluation needs to be incorporated in the process as something that can provide timely direction to the overall public involvement program Evaluation is not a hands-off data-gathering procedure, but an interactive one, which influences the outcome of public involvement” (Syme and Sadler 1994: 539).

The inclusionary model focuses on consensus-building, rather than a criteria-driven approach. Thus, in consultation processes, we are concerned more with reflection, evaluation and refinement, than with monitoring progress toward a specific goal. One of the benefits of this reflexive critique is that it helps us “keep an eye” on whether the emerging plan still “makes sense”.

Principle 11 TRANSFORMATION: Look for the discursive key

In an inclusionary model, the process of listening and paying attention to culturally constructed meanings inevitably allows new understandings and concepts to emerge. Sometimes these concepts permit participants to completely reframe the plan or project and come to a shared vision that is dramatically different from the vision that any participant may have had at the beginning of the process. Hajer (1995) calls this the *discursive key*, which “turns” the discussion from one conception to another. It performs the critical transformative work that allows an issue to be re-framed (Hajer 1995, cited in Healey 1997:277). Thus, inclusionary processes should create space for discursive keys to emerge and identify them as they do. This is the promise of the Western Australian Sustainability Strategy, described below, with which this process is clearly aligned:

Hope, vision, symbolic and iterative change: sustainability recognises that applying these principles as part of a broad strategic vision for the earth can generate hope in the future, and thus it will involve symbolic change that is part of many successive steps over generations (Government of Western Australia, 2003:30).

Principle 12 PROFESSIONALISM: Hold yourself to a high standard

The effective design and implementation of leading practice inclusionary consultation processes are more than merely a skill. Some would call it an art. Inclusionary process facilitation can, of course, be learned.

However, it requires experience, practice and care; even some practitioners experienced in consultation may not be experienced in an inclusionary model. As with any other service industry, consultation facilitation requires a level of professionalism and rigour which will allow the “clients” – from the proponent to the local shopkeeper and resident – to relax and to trust and participate effectively in the process. In politically sensitive arenas within which consultation often takes place, this is even more important.

Professionalism in consultation processes includes paying careful attention to detail in the implementation stage. If the font is too small, the Velcro to hang the poster boards is forgotten, or the facilitator appears to favour one comment over another, participants will be quick to notice “inaccessibility” or lack of neutrality in the process. Professionalism in the analysis and reporting stages of consultation includes maintaining objectivity and adhering to principles of theoretical and analytical rigour. The consultation analysis itself should be transparent and the methods used should be justifiable. In these ways and more, it is important to maintain a high standard in all stages of inclusionary participation.

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