

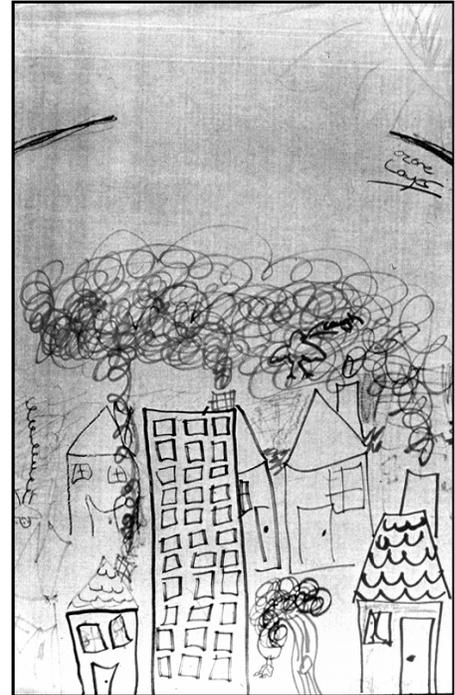
Involving children and young people in planning and design

By Dr Wendy Sarkissian

Working with children

Participation is crucial to effective planning and development of the public realm in residential neighbourhoods. As members of the community, children also need to participate in planning, especially of the public realm if it is to be an effective learning opportunity for their development. Inclusive, leading practice approaches to participatory planning ensure that processes designed to engage with communities:

- Provide opportunities for children to participate directly in planning, building and evaluation of the design, construction and modification of play environments.
- Arrange for feedback from children to ensure that their suggestions are incorporated in ongoing planning and design decisions.
- Find ways to incorporate children's assessment via projects in local schools, photographic essays, etc. (see Sarkissian et al., 1997).
- Engage children directly in assessment and evaluation processes and ensure that they are advised of the results of their work.
- Encourage children's participation in any redesign or repair work (and associated management decisions) to reduce incidence of vandalism and wilful damage.



Above: This child drew a coughing bird and a hole in the ozone layer to depict the consequences of a new waterfront housing development in his neighbourhood

The insight and level of detail that often emerge from participatory processes involving children and young people surprise some adults. These processes are always great fun and very rewarding. Often a fresh perspective on a project emerges. For processes to be both efficient and interesting for young people and provide valuable information for planners and designers, four factors must be taken into account. First, the process must be specifically designed for the age group of participants. They must not be treated as "small adults".

Second, objectives must be clear and facilitators selected and briefed to achieve those objectives. Third, the process must be well resourced - especially in terms of materials, equipment and personnel. And finally, the results of the process must be carefully analysed and integrated into the results of other participatory processes.

It is critical that all work done by children and young people be identified with the child's name, sex and age to facilitate later assessment and analysis. This will also allow you to return work once it has been analysed and copied.

We have had great success in a workshop for new residents where the videotaped results of a children's workshop (running concurrently) were played on a large screen for their parents at the end of the adults' workshop.

It is essential that adult participants of any simultaneous workshop be fully involved in the debriefing session.

This ensures that all information is shared and that the children's participation is not treated as token. To ensure that the report accurately reflects the children's views, facilitators, recorders and animators must be fully debriefed.

The success of a children's participatory planning or design process depends largely on the people who are facilitating and recording. We have found that enthusiastic people who work in the design field are great for maintaining the energy necessary for a children's workshop. Their background knowledge of environmental and design issues is important. As children learn about environmental design, the consultant begins to understand how children and young people perceive the world around them, and the facilitators and recorders begin to understand the importance of the views and perceptions of children in participatory design processes.

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The rationale for young people's participation

"Too often, when interviewing young people, one gets the response: No one listens to me. The politicians don't care. Nobody cares"
(Driskell 2002:13).

A large body of expert literature emphasises how young people have been marginalised in consultation processes, in Australia and internationally. Young people's participation should complement adults' participation, and not be subsumed by it. Ignoring young people's views jeopardises the social, economic and environmental quality of our communities and neighbourhoods. Empowering young people by including them in local initiatives can create feelings of solidarity, respect for one's environment, for public institutions and for the public authorities that run them and serve them.

Some common arguments against young people's consultation include: that young people are unreliable and tend to change their minds often; that they are too immature and naïve to make decisions. Some young people show these limitations, but so do some adults. There are methods to involve young people with varied skills and maturity levels. People who work in participatory projects with children and young people are continually amazed at how mature, insightful and creative they can be. The same arguments were used for many years against the participation of women in development projects.



Another argument is that that young people cannot foresee the long-term consequences of their actions; but many adults can't either. Education is an important part of any participation process. Young people need to understand the potential consequences of their recommendations and actions. If anyone has a stake in the future, and a concern about long-term consequences, it is young people. Their voices are critical to the decisions that will affect the future.

Others argue that they were young once, and that adults have the information and knowledge to make the best decisions for the interests of young people. However, things have changed since these adults were young. Nobody knows better than today's children and youth what it is like to be young today. Young people themselves are most knowledgeable about their own lives. Outside 'experts' should facilitate, not dominate, democracy.

Consulting young people also provide opportunities to help young people acquire new skills and understanding, providing a foundation and impetus for participation and empowerment in their futures. These include opportunities to:

- Participate in a new and exciting activity
- Look at and understand their local community and environment in new ways
- Learn about democracy and tolerance
- Develop a network of new friends, including community role models and resource people
- Develop new skills and knowledge
- Help create positive change in the local environment and other aspects of the community
- Develop a sense of environmental stewardship and civic responsibility
- Develop confidence in their abilities to accomplish the goals they set
- Strengthen their self-esteem, identity and sense of pride.

- Benefits are not limited to young people. Members of the community also have the opportunity to:
- Understand how young people in their community view the world, their community and themselves
- Identify ways in which the quality of life for local people can be improved
- Build stronger sense of community and pride of place
- Appreciate the ideas and contributions of young people
- Invest time and energy in the future of the community.

Adapted from Driskell, D. (2002) *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth*. London: Earthscan.

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