

Liveable Communities Project Workshop Outcomes: Every Picture Tells a Story

Each workgroup was provided with a set of photographs depicting street scenes, open spaces, public buildings and facilities, and shopping centres and plazas. Each picture was printed at the top of an A4 page with room for participants to make comments below. Once their task was explained and examples given, each workgroup was given sufficient time to view and discuss each of the photographs assigned to their workgroup.

In carrying out this exercise local residents were able to focus on particular details of the design and/or construction beyond the expectations of the facilitators. In some cases, participants detailed information about the difficulties interacting with the particular location, and in some cases, go beyond the borders of the pictures to explain their experiences. For example, in Gilgandra, a general picture of the main street brought forth concerns about difficulty accessing the pharmacy, particularly for people who have reduced mobility. Parking, lack of seating and shade all became topics of discussion.

It was through this exercise and ensuing discussions that the five key features identified through the checklist analysis came to the fore (footpaths, seating, lighting, wayfinding and toilets). Indeed, this exercise consolidated these as key features for older people. In addition, it became clear that parking was also an issue, with or without a mobility permit, and should be added to the list. A more detailed description of common themes follows.

Pedestrian access and footpaths

Lack of footpaths in both rural and urban locations was a major issue. Footpaths were evident in main streets in all council areas as well as some well-established residential areas. Where grassed areas were intended as footpaths (consistent with the 'garden suburb' concept) these were assessed as difficult for wheelchair use, whether being pushed or self-propelled, mobility scooters, and difficult for people with baby strollers and shopping trolleys.

There are two other issues with grassed walkways, particularly in rural areas where the distance from the home to the property boundary and then to the roadway is often wider than in urban areas. Driveways in rural settings may also be grassed rather than concreted. The first issue is the distance that garbage bins need to be pulled over grass and the second is the maintenance of this grassed area, which is the responsibility of the resident. For older people this can become problematic. Where councils offer a "wheel-in-wheel-out" collection service, either free of charge or for a small fee, and where the resident subscribes to this, garbage collection becomes less of an issue. However, even when footpaths were present there were concerns such as:

- A steep gradient towards the kerb, which causes pain for people with hip problems, and difficulty for people pushing strollers, wheeled walkers, wheelchairs and shopping trolleys (see Figure 3-1)
- Incomplete footpaths which end unexpectedly, or do not connect to important points such as bus stops (see Figure 3-2)

- Paving with trip hazards and footpaths with overhanging shrubbery making travel difficult for people with wheeled mobility devices
- Kerb ramps, where present, were often steep and sometimes too narrow for a double stroller, or for a single stroller and a small child walking alongside (see Figure 3-3)
- Kerb ramps that were poorly finished and were not flush with the roadway or the pavement (see Figure 3.3)
- The inconsistent placement, style and colour contrast of tactile ground surface indicators on or near to kerb ramps and road crossings (see Figures 3-4 and 3-5)



Figure 3-1: Footpath sloping steeply to the kerb



Figure 3-2: Footpath ends unexpectedly



Figure 3-3: Kerb ramps poorly designed and constructed



Figure 3-4: Inconsistent placement of tactile markers in the same location



Figure 3-5: Confusing application of tactile markers

Also associated with footpaths was access to shops and other facilities where steps were evident (Figure 3-6), or inappropriately applied or designed ramps. One common theme was stepped access to country hotels and pubs, (Figures 3-7, 3-8) which are often the focal point of social and community activities in these localities. It was interesting to note that several councils have banned the use of sandwich boards on footpaths as these were considered a hazard, particularly for people with low vision



Figure 3-6: Stepped access to shops



Figure 3-7: Stepped access to hotel (1)



Figure 3-8: Stepped access to hotel (2)

Poor placement or lack of pedestrian road crossings was mentioned in all rural workshops. The feedback indicates that if the road is maintained as a state or national road, there are restrictions on pedestrian crossings, even if the speed limit through the main street is restricted to 50 kilometres per hour. While pedestrian refuge islands and street narrowing was acceptable at strategic locations, pedestrians are expected to give way to traffic. In Berrigan one crossing sign (see Figure 3-9) advises pedestrians to give way to vehicles. It should also be noted that many roads country towns in New South Wales are very broad, reflecting the settlement days of bullock drays and mid-street parking (see Figure 3-10). This makes safe crossing by slow moving pedestrians more problematic.



Figure 3-9: Pedestrians give way to vehicles in country towns



Figure 3-10: Wide streets are a common feature in country towns

Seating in streets and open spaces

Seating to allow a person to rest or wait for a bus was discussed in all workshops. While many main streets provided seats, their placement, height or design was not optimum. As the examples show in Figures 3-11 and 3-12 street seating design varies considerably. Seating, with backrests and armrests, which is situated in shady locations was considered optimum. Whether the seating faced towards or away from the roadway and traffic depended upon the location. If the seating was provided at a bus stop, being able to watch for the bus was more important for orientating the seating.



Figure 3-11 Street seating varies from town to town (1)



Figure 3-12: Street seating varies from town to town (2)

Functional seating was preferred over “funky” seating in all situations, including public places such as shopping centres and libraries as shown in Figures 3-13 and 3-14.

People who have difficulty rising from seats are concerned that if they sit down, they may not be able to get up again, at least, with dignity. Consequently unusual seat design does not inspire confidence in their use, whereas standard style seating with backrests and armrests does. This is not to say that attractive seat design cannot be installed in public places. Providing a range of seating types in the one location gives people of all ages and abilities a choice.



Figure 3-13: Shopping centre seating

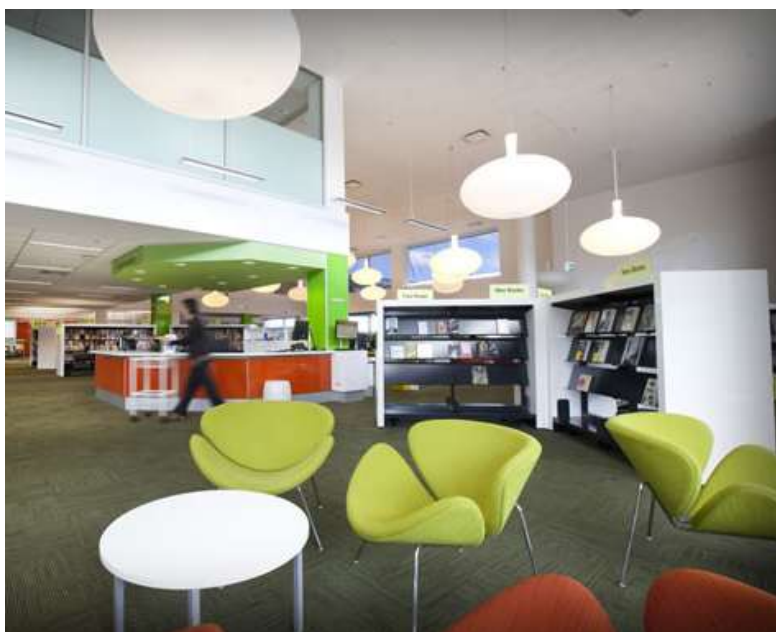


Figure 3-14: Library seating

Lighting

Good and even lighting is required during daylight hours as well as at night. Lighting is often considered in terms of safety and visibility at night. People with low vision require good lighting to read signs, instructions and keypads. People who experience difficulty with visual perception, such as judging distance and discerning shapes, also require good lighting, particularly evenly distributed lighting. This means lighting design should avoid pools of light and reflective surfaces. Where the floor surface is heavily patterned, the situation is exacerbated.

Figure 3-15 shows reflections of spot lighting together with irregular floor patterning which some people find confusing in terms of where to walk. Figure 3-16 shows a short shopping mall where the lighting is placed regularly, but not evenly, and is reflected in the flooring. Also, the black section is level, but it can look like a ramp, a step or a large hole in the ground for people with perception difficulties. Nevertheless, this mall is a good example of incorporating a change in level which uses the available distance to minimise the grade.



Figure 3-15: Spot lighting and irregular patterning



**Figure3-16:
Reflections and pools
of light are confusing**

Most people from their mid-forties onwards begin to experience age-related vision loss or changes in visual acuity. Consequently, low vision is a very common occurrence in the population.

One other theme emerging from the workshops was the co-location of street lighting with tree plantings where the lighting is obscured by the trees. The conflict between street shade and street lighting can likely be resolved by landscape designers.

Wayfinding

Wayfinding is more than just signage: it begins with the design of the built form that considers how people will move through a place or site easily and successfully – that is, without getting lost, and finding the place they were looking for. Prominent landmarks, such as sculptures and fountains, are also useful cues for helping people find their way and spatially locate themselves.

Signage is part of wayfinding: it can direct people to places (toilets and lifts) and label places so people know they have arrived at the right place. Both are essential. Wayfinding can also be achieved in map form for people who are skilled at reading maps. However, people still need to find their way to maps with the use of wayfinding signage. While large shopping malls often provide maps to help orient people, this is rarely, if ever, signed.

It is also important to use conventional and internationally recognised signage and to avoid fancy fonts and scripts. Using a combination of colour, symbols, lettering and numbering in multi-level and large car parks is often useful. Care should be taken however, to ensure the labelling of each floor and section is unique and not repeated in any part of the facility. Repeat signage styles are sometimes used when additional car parking is added later in a different part of the facility.

Figure 3-17 shows an inventive strip map for a shopping mall that is intended to locate the reader in their current position relative to the mall. Interestingly, the comments in the workshop where this picture was used, indicates the difficulty in designing maps that the majority of people will find useful.

Comments from the workshop where this picture was analysed included the following: visually confusing, lettering is too small, sideways orientation of lettering not easy to read, need reference to landmarks, not just street names, not enough colour contrast, and the need for universal mapping for people who do not have English as their first language.



Figure 3-17: Shopping centre signage for wayfinding

Toilets

Access to public toilets becomes a major factor when out and about for many people as they age. Fear of 'having an accident' can prevent some older people from venturing to places where there are few, if any, toilets, or toilets that are accessible. One of the key issues for older people is access to accessible (frequently labelled 'disabled') toilets when they have a wheelchair, wheeled walker, or need the assistance of a carer. Parents with small children and/or with children in strollers also find accessible toilets very convenient as well.

In many country locations, and in some suburban shopping centres, these toilets are locked. When the need is urgent, it is very frustrating to find the toilet locked and/or with instructions to call for an attendant to bring the key. One shopping centre example is shown in Figure 3-18 where the potential user is required to ring a mobile number to gain access.



Figure 3-18: Locked toilet in a shopping centre

Councils are however, required to comply with disability discrimination legislation and the Access to Premises Standard with new construction and refurbishment of existing facilities. The new facilities shown in Figure 3-19 received a good response with comments such as: room to leave mobility aid outside; wheelchair friendly; spacious; easy access – wide doors; straight access; and central location. Nevertheless, a trip hazard was identified along with a poorly located pole, and no easy access parking.



Figure 3-19: Well designed and located toilets



Attitudes to older people

Included in the mix of photographs at each workshop were three pictures of older people in different situations. One depicted a man and a woman pointing fencing foils at each other, the second showed four women in their 50s wearing sporting gear and holding a netball, and the third showed two women in a city street sitting on a ledge.

The first picture shown in Figure 3-20 depicting two people fencing elicited two distinct sets of responses: those that thought age was not a barrier to continuing to enjoy activities and try new things, and those who thought this activity was unsuitable and dangerous for older people.



Figure 3-20: Attitudes to older people depend on your perspective

Typical responses in favour of the activity were:

- Anyone can do anything
- There is always a way to adapt an activity to cater for all ages and abilities
- Still trying and experiencing life – not 'stuck at home'
- A new skill to learn
- Focusing on ability and not disability
- Older people having a good time – having fun – keeping active
- Good for social interaction
- Picture is breaking stereotypes - Outside the box – excellent!
- Decreased mobility does not stop activity
- An excellent activity – taking a risk is part of life

Typical responses showing concern about the activity were:

- They need safety gear – goggles and clothing
- Seems an inappropriate activity for this age group, but could not stop them
- Unsafe to use walking frame one-handed
- Impact on workers, OH&S guidelines – a program such as this would be difficult and impossible to implement especially in a government setting
- Bystanders at risk
- Fun but too dangerous for elderly
- With poor vision and mobility, not a suitable activity.

The picture depicting older women in a sporting scene shown in Figure 3-20 was seen as positive for health and socialisation, and that there should be no barriers to continuing involvement. Typical responses were:

- Sport is not just for kids
- Good to see an older team

- Age people are beautiful especially if they can still play sport
- Positive role models for healthy ageing -
- Opportunity for participation, inclusion, socialising
- Shows me it is possible to continue to actively participation in sport, be social
- Inspiring to see 55 age group active and socialising
- Sporting groups for retirees, a good idea
- Intergenerational activity
- Thinking young, not vegetating
- A fast game – good for eye and foot coordination
- Feeling valued and included in the community
- Opportunity to share wisdom with younger generation

This picture also elicited some comments about the adequacy of the local facilities for netball, such as: poor parking, dark and dingy toilets, surface quality of the courts, and poor access. There was one comment about the stress on joints in older age due to the hard court surface.



Figure 3-21: Sport is good at any age



Figure 3-22: Absence of seating is a problem

The third picture shown in Figure 3-22 was used in two workshops. It shows two older women, possibly mother and daughter, sitting on the edge of a platform constructed to support two columns. Some participants thought this was just inappropriately designed and poorly located seating. The majority of participants thought this picture indicated that much needed seating was not available and this was a last resort.

Other issues

While the built environment served as a catalyst for focusing attention on an ageing population, there were many other issues arising in discussions. These issues link with some of the ideas that emerged in the next session when participants were asked to think about ways in which the goals in the Community Strategic Plan could be applied to the older population.

Garbage collection and recycling

In all workshops the issues of manoeuvring large garbage bins from the house to the street was discussed. Some councils offer a service to residents who cannot move their bins to the street each week. Great Lakes, provides a "Wheel-In -Wheel-Out" service for residents who paid a small fee which was added to the rates. This service was written into the garbage collection agreement with the contractors where the operators would bring the bin to the collection vehicle and return the empty bin to the property.

Some participants believed this service was not necessary because this could be done, indeed, *should* be done, by friendly neighbours. A contrary view was that some people prefer to look after their own needs so they can maintain a sense of independence and dignity.

With space in landfill sites now at a premium, recycling by residents has become more important. Some councils run education programs for school children to show what happens to the garbage at the landfill and recycling plants. There was a perception that older people may not fully understand how and what to recycle because recycling is a relatively new concept. In some workshops, thought was given to methods for informing and educating older people about recycling.

The role of the library and librarian

In all workshops, the role of the library and the librarian was highlighted as a key resource for older people. While the nature of libraries is changing with the advent of new and electronic technologies, older people continue to look to libraries as their link to services and information beyond that of borrowing books.

Librarians were present at most workshops, and possibly the most unexpected finding is the lack of knowledge that other council staff had about the role of their council library, the breadth of librarian skills, and the range of services libraries can offer.

Utilising senior skills and time

While many of the workshop discussions were focused on assisting older people either through services or design of the built environment, there were some discussions about the contributions older people can make. These ranged from helping children to read and being volunteer tour guides for visitors, to assisting with bushland regeneration schemes and developing peer education programs for seniors.

Economic benefits of older people

Capitalising on the disposable income of the more affluent retirees and "grey nomads" was another regular theme, particularly in rural areas where tourism is, a significant part of the local economy. Discussions on this aspect began in the picture analysis session and were continued into the next session on the goals from the Community Strategic Plan.

Summary of the picture analysis

The process of discussing the attributes within the photographs, and in some cases, beyond those captured in the picture, was enlightening for both participants and workshop leaders. Many aspects of the public built environment came under scrutiny

and some participants were surprised at how many comments they could contribute. The small group discussion process also allowed peer learning to occur where older community members and community service providers could explain why certain aspects of streetscapes, public buildings, and road crossings were not optimal in terms of safety and/or access, or constituted barriers to access. Overall, this exercise highlighted that the details of design are important, and that engineers, safety officers, asset managers, landscape architects and waste managers all need to understand the importance of these details.

The pictures depicting older people in non-stereotypical situations received a positive response overall. Allied health professionals and aged care workers, however, were less enthusiastic about the picture depicting two people fencing. They were likely considering the situation from the perspective of their professional roles and their duty of care. This raises the philosophical question about how the rights of older people to make their own decisions to take risks are evaluated against protecting them from something dangerous (for their age).