Growing Up in Cities

as a model of participatory planning and 'place-making' with young people

by Karen Malone

Photo: Sue Headley

Negative representations generated by remote media sources appear to affect both the relationship of young people to their environment and the relationship of planners to young people. A UNESCO project designed to involve young people in the planning and creation of their urban environment found that the media's creation of a "virtual" urban environment – drug-ridden and violent – influenced young people's relationship with their own neighbourhood as much if not more than its physical and social aspects. Similarly, the media creation of young people as a problematic group contributed to the reluctance of planners to allow young people to participate authentically in the planning of relevant public and private spaces.

CHILDREN, youth, and young people are socially constructed concepts which, depending on young people's social, cultural and political circumstances, have different meanings in space and time. To understand young people, it is necessary to shift the focus from the general – what they have in common, to the specific – the differences and similarities which represent young people's diversity.

Young people represent a substantial percentage of the Australian (and global) community. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC 1997) figures reveal that 4.8 million Australians, or over a quarter of Australia's population, are under the age of eighteen. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data, 15% of our young people are born overseas, 67% live in urban centres, and most attend educational institutions (ABS 1997). Young people spend more time engaged in recreational pursuits and have a higher concern for the environment than any other cohort in Australian society (ABS 1997).

Young people have very different needs and aspirations from other members of the community; however, their experiences are also very diverse and complex. Any attempt to universalise the "youth" experience fundamentally denies young people the opportunity to participate, individually and collectively, as active members of civil society. Because most young people live in family units, much of their leisure time is spent in local neighbourhoods. Consequently, they are knowledgeable about their local area and acutely susceptible to negative or positive change to it.

Young people recognise offers of "apparent" participation, and where their input is minimised, they are

masters of the "I don't know" syndrome. They know that authentic participation is not choosing the colours on the walls of the youth centre or planting trees in the new playground. The assumption that young people, when given the opportunity to participate in planning processes, will ask for "pie in the sky" or unrealistic changes is an urban (planning) myth. Rather, given the opportunity, most young people have insightful and practical ideas which take into account the needs of the whole community.

With a current shift, in this era of late modernity, to reconstructing public space as a "commodity", young people are increasingly being monitored, controlled and in many cases excluded from using public spaces. As a consequence of these exclusionary tactics, young people have been devalued in regard to their capacity to contribute to discussions of public space planning, their needs and concerns are often not even considered and, due to their loss of mobility, they have profoundly limited environmental experiences.

Growing Up In Cities in Australia, a brief history

Growing Up in Cities (GUIC) is a participatory research and planning project that has, in the development, implementation and action phases, attempted to explore new ways of working with young people in regard to planning. The original project – Children's Perception of Space – was conducted in the early 1970s as part of UNESCO's program Man and His Environment – Design for Living. Coordinated by prominent urban planner, Kevin Lynch, the research was conducted in Argentina, Australia, Mexico and Poland. The findings were published in the book *Growing Up In Cities* (Lynch 1977). The guiding principle of the original project was that children and youth should not only have the opportunity to express their ideas but also become engaged in articulating and implementing actions which should contribute to substantial changes in their perceptions, use and connection with their local environment (Lynch 1977). The project has recently been replicated in eight countries including Australia. The intention of the revisit was to explore how the context of young people's lives had changed since the original project in light of the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and recent United Nations projects such as: Habitat II, the Rio Declaration and UNICEF's Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (UNICEF 1996).

From its beginnings, GUIC focused on young people aged between 10 and 15, a period when it was felt they were most susceptible to change in their local neighbourhood. The project was built on the presupposition that between the ages of 10 and 15 many young people use their neighbourhood as a resource through which they learn, through play and socialisation, to be more independent of the family unit. It is also a time when young people deal with major physical and social transitional developments – they shift from primary to secondary school, and from childhood play to adult responsibilities, while developing an increased awareness of sexuality, difference and identity construction in relation to themselves, their peers and their physical environment. Ideally, many of these activities are "played out" in the neighbourhood. In regard to participation, because these developments occur within the local neighbourhood, young people have an investment in positive changes; whereas, after the age of 15, many young people grow up out of rather than in their neighbourhoods. The study had a participatory intent and was based on a cross-disciplinary methodology extracted from research methods used in education, physical design, and geographical and anthropological traditions. Methods used in the Australian study included: one-on-one interviews, focus groups, peer-interviews on video, participant-taken photographs, mapping of roaming range, participant-led guided tours, photo-grids and community surveys.

The Australian GUIC research site in 1972, and again in 1997, was Braybrook – a flat, stark, monotonous, semi-industrial western suburb of Melbourne, couched between a train yard and a polluted river, and divided by a major road. There are three distinct streetscapes: industrial, residential and arterial. The greater part of the estate housing was built by the State Government in the 1950s and consists of prefabricated, concrete, semi-detached and detached houses and flats up to three storeys. Built on reclaimed wetland, the buildings suffer chronic rising damp damage and a considerable number have already been abandoned or demolished. Public spaces include treeless flat parks, sporting ovals and wild places such as the river. Several community facilities have been built since the original study, including new schools, a recreational sporting complex and a health and youth centre. Additionally, more local shops, an entertainment centre and fast food outlets have appeared along the perimeter of the neighbourhood; however, the centre of the estate has changed very little except that many of the houses and roads are now in a state of disrepair.

Over 100 young people were voluntarily involved in some form of data collection in the 1997 GUIC project. Forty of this group were involved in all facets of the project. All the young people lived in Braybrook and were in the target age group. Subjects were selected to provide a range in gender, ethnicity, age and longevity in the neighbourhood. The intention of the researchers was to provide comparative data for a cross-country and longitudinal analysis, and

to provide a forum for young people to be involved in a local council project to develop a community centre.

At first the council were supportive of the possibility of "youth" input in their redevelopment process; however, in the end we believe they did not value the work we did with the young people. The culture of youth regulation and the positioning of youth as "problem" which prevailed in this institution meant that the research team and the young people were constantly marginalised and devalued. This made it almost impossible for us to work alongside the planners and community workers.

The following discussion draws on data from both the original and contemporary GUIC projects and provides glimpses of how young people have participated in negotiations of space and their ideas for change.

Young people "in" and "out" of place

Deciding who belongs and who doesn't belong is an important way of shaping social spaces and creating boundaries between private and public places. Young people can be made to feel "out of place" or excluded from public space in two ways – either through the exclusionary practices of outside agents (for example, through regulatory practices and policies) or by self-policing.

According to recent research, young people in the late 20th century have been positioned as "intruders" in the public and private spaces of city life (Valentine 1996; Malone & Hasluck 1998). With continued recasting of the metropolis, the regulation of urban space is being orchestrated from moral panics and media campaigns against young people. Positioned as the "other", young people are portrayed through media and police campaigns as deviant, barbaric, unclean, and a threat to social order. These moral panics and campaigns are fanned by the writings of journalists: "… as reports of young people carrying weapons increase, so does the community's anxiety"; "Police will be stepping up their campaign against violence and unruly behaviour by youths in the CBD"; "Police will be out in force … continuing operation against youths carrying knives" (*Geelong Advertiser* 17 Oct. 1997).

Frank Stilwell (1993) holds that neighbourhood form, its maintenance, and the importance placed on public and private spaces by residents and outside decision-makers shape people's perceptions about society, themselves and the social values they adopt. According to Relph (1976), the inability to construct physical images of place can be often attributed to a person's placelessness or loss of "sense of place" (Pocock & Hudson 1978). The Braybrook neighbourhood existed for young people as "out there", a place beyond their houses or the houses of their friends. Young people developed a sophisticated schema of fear which became a form of self-policing – in a way not unlike Foucault's model of the panopticon. These research results highlight the connection between a lack of environmental experience and young people's inability to develop a sense of place, or to use Relph's (1976) term, their placelessness. This has long-term consequences for their capacity to contribute now and in adult life to the reconstruction of their communities.

To illustrate these points, the research data is discussed under the two headings of flow and fear. Flow represents young people's place use and spatial range in the physical environment and fear represents the expression of struggles over space use.

Flow

Two-thirds of the 30 young people interviewed in the 1972 GUIC study in Braybrook said they were able to go wherever they wished in both their own area and in the city (Downton 1973). Their movements were inhibited only by parents' time stipulations, the inappropriateness of destinations, lack of money, responsibility for siblings and lack of destinations. Inappropriate places included billiard rooms, hotels, R-rated movies, busy roads and the river. The following remark by a young girl was a typical answer to the question of movement: "I can go where I want to provided I tell Mum and there is somebody with me." Even though young people were

A model designed by young people showing how a flat open park could be reconstructed as a multi-use community space.

able to go wherever was appropriate, the most frequent recreational activity for young people was watching television. When asked why they didn't engage in activities outside their homes they were apathetic about the capacity of the physical environment to be engaging: "… it is boring, there's nothing to do."

As in the 1972 study, young people in the 1997 study predominantly specified sporting or social centres as their favourite places with their emphasis on the social nature of activities. Also in line with the previous findings, young people identified friends' houses and their homes as favourite places. The local river, although believed to be polluted, was quite popular in both surveys, with the shopping mall and local shops playing a much greater part in 1997. Although the children recognise the streets as a place where they spend a lot of time, none of them identified streets as a favourite place.

Young people involved in the second survey used a mental mapping exercise to identify and discuss their spatial range and flow. These spatial maps indicated that most young people (especially young women) did not often move at ease beyond the centre core of the neighbourhood or a few streets from their homes. When asked why they restricted their movements the young people recited stories of violence and criminal activity in their daily lives. They had developed sophisticated "risk"-related cognitive maps of their neighbourhood environment. That is, they were able to understand their neighbourhood in terms of safe and dangerous places where they could or couldn't go. A strong correlation was found between this cognitive risk data and young people's time use and spatial flow. Young people spent very little time engaged in activities which involved either moving through unsafe or dangerous places or which were conducted in close proximity to these "risky" places.

Fear

The young people in both studies were asked to identify those areas in the community where they often felt uncomfortable, fearful, unsafe or scared and the possible reasons for these feelings. In 1972, physical elements of the urban environment were identified as the most dangerous aspects of the neighbourhood. Roads and the railway lines were considered dangerous due to the large volumes of traffic, and the river because of its isolation and the risk of harm from natural causes such as snake bite or undertows. The dangers of the street were also identified, particularly around the football club (now Youth Centre) and the hotel, with gangs and fights being mentioned (Downton 1973). The places identified by the young people in 1972 were identifiable and avoidable places – therefore as long as they didn't go near these sites they felt safe.

In contrast, 25 years later, 80% of males and 90% of females stated that there were dangerous places throughout their neighbourhood. One in every 10 females also said everywhere in the neighbourhood was dangerous (Malone & Hasluck 1998).

> *We don't really like our local area much because there are so many stupid people and attacks going on. We can't go out at night because you don't know what kind of people are out there* (Two young women, aged 14, 1998).

A third of all young people identified streets as the place where they felt most in danger for reasons not expressed in the original study. While traffic flow has increased over the past 25 years, fear of moving vehicles has diminished in importance. Young women and men designated drugs, alcohol, physical and verbal abuse as the primary reasons for feeling at risk in the streets. The majority of young people, when reciting stories of incidents where young people were victims of abuse, violence or felt unsafe, identified adults or adult activities (drug taking, drunkenness, policing) as the cause. The following comment by a Somalian youth is a typical story:

> *Police often discriminate against us, they pick on us. Once we were walking on the street with a friend and a policeman in a car stopped and asked me my name and address for no reason. He said to me don't speak bloody African language. This made me my feel really angry because he didn't respect my language or culture. He pushed my friend over when he came to help me* (Youth Newsletter 1997).

Many young people expressed a concern that they were "moved on" in public space either by the police or community members.

Discussion

The majority of young people in the recent study expressed a fear of harassment or abuse and as a consequence did not access community facilities and resources or spend time in public space. Their fears focused on the social rather than the physical geography – on space rather than place. For example, even though streets were identified as the cause of the greatest danger in both studies, it wasn't the traffic or the physical condition of the streets which caused the problems in 1997 but social transactions in street space. Young people in the 1970s made no mention of drugs, alcohol or violence other than incidental connections between physical places (such as the football club and the hotel) and drunk or violent groups. Most young people in the original study felt able to overcome their fears or the dangers by avoiding problem places. In our recent study, many of the young people have responded to their fears by retreating to private places and private spaces.

Although both groups of young

people felt excluded from public spaces, it seems that in 1972 young people could move more freely around the neighbourhood without fear of victimisation but they chose not to. Why? Both groups of young people spoke of being "bored" and having restricted opportunities or agency to manipulate or change their environment. Differences across time reveal this lack of agency stemming from two different positions of otherness. In 1972, the young people suffered the stigma of being both working class and working-class youth. Positioned as "invisible" in a dollar-driven adult world, their needs were not taken into account in the planning, design or development of the urban spaces, consequently the environment provided limited interest for them. They experienced the world through television or from scruffy street corners. In 1997, the facilities available seem more abundant and yet only a small minority of young people visit or occupy public spaces on a regular basis – thus contributing to a physical environment that is both unoccupied and unsociable. Ironically, as George Morgan (1994, p.80) explains: "… a contrast can be drawn between the fear of the dense and public sociability at the turn of the century and the contemporary fear of urban crime which is based on a lack of sociability in street spaces that are not occupied or controlled." The recent GUIC study also revealed that the majority of young people acquired their knowledge and heightened fear of the physical, natural and cultural geography through media, parental and peer imagery rather than experiences in the environment.

Responding to young people's needs

After the interview data was compiled and these issues identified, a number of workshops were held with young people who had either participated in the interviews or who had an interest in exploring issues further. Their input in the workshops again supported our findings that many young people were experiencing a sense of disconnection from the physical, natural and social environment. To articulate these feelings, the group developed a comprehensive list of what young people need in their local environment in order for them to feel good about themselves:

- unregulated places, whether privately or publicly owned, where they can congregate without undue harassment, surveillance or intervention by adults;
- a diversity of public spaces ranging from their immediate environment through to places for them to meet in neighbouring communities, thus expanding their spatial range, lived experiences and interaction with other young people;
- safe and secure meeting places which are well lit, private and diverse in their malleability to individual needs (gender and ethnic differences) and are easily accessible via private or public transport;
- indoor and outdoor areas which are flexible in terms of shelter;
- authentic input into decision-making concerning the use of public places and choices in the ways and times for utilising these areas;
- variety in the dimension, size and malleability of places, ranging from large and small commercial areas and community facilities to informal undeveloped open spaces and formal developed open spaces;
- secure and safe corridors for moving around the urban environment without harassment, regulation or surveillance;
- facilities which encourage, consolidate and allow identification and connection with the surrounding physical, social and natural environment of their community; and
- opportunities to engage in discussions with others about their concerns, needs and aspirations, and to have their views acted on.

An issues paper was sent to the local council highlighting the concerns and needs as identified by the young people. Unfortunately, the council had already initiated the consultation process for the development of the community centre. This process, although participatory and community oriented in rhetoric, was pragmatically constructed in that community needs were seen as adult needs and youth

Presentation to council and city planners by young people involved in the streetspace project.

were seen as a problem. Planning with young people was about "getting them involved" so they didn't burn the centre down when it was finished, rather than acknowledging that young people had different and distinct needs from the rest of the community. Ironically, the community centre was set on fire two weeks after opening which lead to further aggravation and tension between the young people and other members of the community.

To provide young people with a positive outcome of the research, the GUIC team applied for funding from the ARTS Council of Victoria and the State Ministry of Education under the Artists and Environmental Designers in Schools project (AEDIS) to conduct a school-based environmental design project with 60 young people from the local area. The project, Streetspace, was conducted in 1998 at Braybrook Secondary College. An overview of the project intention follows:

> *Streetspace is an environmental design project engaging young people and an environmental designer in a creative, innovative and community driven urban street design project. The project will give the opportunity for the environmental designer to share with young people her expertise and experiences in working on landscape, streetscape and installation designs.*
>
> *Streetspace focuses on urban space and how streets play an important role in people's movement and flow around urban spaces.*
>
> *Streetspace is about capturing the spirit and essence of movement and flow in creative and physical forms (built and natural).*
>
> *Streetspace is about designing and creating streetscapes that encourage young people and others to venture out into the streets and enjoy the urban environment.*

Young people presented a series of models of their Streetspace designs and a report to representatives of the city council, youth services and AEDIS in November 1998.

Project participants taking the researchers and environmental designer on a guided tour of the local neighbourhood

Conclusions

Building neighbourhoods which function in a just and equitable manner for young people should be an urban planning priority. The diversity of young people, their experience and the context of their lives are issues which need considerable reflection when planning with or for young people. It is important to recognise that public space is not neutral – geographies of power, resistance and control are mapped out in real and imaginary boundaries across the landscape (Morgan 1994; Sibley 1995). To transgress, as many young people do, is to disrupt these boundaries and find one's self "out of place" (Valentine 1996; Malone & Hasluck 1998).

Young people, through categorisation and appropriation, are located in a liminal zone – too old for playgrounds, too young to be valued community members. When they transgress these categories it becomes a source of anxiety for society as Sibley (1995, p.34) explains: "Adolescents may be threatening to adults because they transgress the adult/child boundary and appear discrepant in 'adult' spaces … teenagers demonstrate that the act of drawing the line in the constructions of discrete categories and interrupt what is naturally continuous." The response by neighbourhood groups is often to "alienate" or exclude young people from particular places – spaces which are thought to be the domain of adults (Valentine 1996; Malone & Hasluck 1998). Public space becomes "adult" space and young people begin to occupy but the fringes of the neighbourhood. They are constantly told to "move on", to find (an) other space. But where does this "other" space exist?

If neighbourhoods are to become youth-friendly, young people need to be part of the planning process. However, to participate constructively, they need to be skilled. Young people who have limited access to different urban environments need environmental exposure so they can read the environment and be critical consumers of designs and plans. To address the misconceptions that the community and outsiders have about young

people, it is important that young people are given the opportunity to take up space in public places.

Participatory planning means addressing power relationships through changes in the policing, regulation, monitoring and planning of public space for young people. Planning with young people is not just about changing or designing physical forms or structures – it is about understanding the culture of a community. To do this, rigorous research rather than superficial consultation needs to be conducted with and by the young people about their lives. But it can't be assumed that young people are going to be "able" or "willing" to participate until a commitment to valuing their contribution is made. Would adults ask any less?

For planners, working with young people means diversifying the types of community consultation processes they employ. Young people like to be pragmatic, mobile and stimulated by their involvement – this is what excites them. Chasing behind a group of young people on bicycles during a neighbourhood tour while trying to write notes and take photographs has been the most successful research method we have used. In contrast, community meetings often lead to disinterest and the silencing of young people. Planning with young people means exposing the layers of historical and social debris on the streets, reading the neighbourhood from the lives of young people, and embarking on participatory processes with them. The role of the young person is to be willing, the task of the planner is to be able. A final word from two young women who presented their Streetspace designs to city council planners:

> *Our local area desperately needs more facilities for young people. Streetspace allowed us the opportunity to design spaces for the youth of Braybrook. We only hope that the council will now seriously think over our ideas and allow us to have more facilities and useable space. The council and planners always think about facilities for toddlers, such as playgrounds, but now we would like them to think about facilities for older children and teenagers* (Emma, aged 14).

> *Young people should have a say in what their area looks like. I think council should listen to what young people have to say because they live in the area and they are future taxpayers* (Amanda, aged 14).

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Note

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A public report from the Streetspace project is currently being compiled and will be available from the author on request in late 1999.

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