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New Planner

New urban environments – for an older and less mobile population

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THEME – Putting the NEW in NSW – urban renewal In Sydney and regional centres, infrastructure and major projects.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) predicts the number of people in Australia aged 65 to 84 years to increase from 2.4 million in 2007 to 6.4 million in 2056. The population of NSW is projected to increase from 3.3 to 10.2 million, and Sydney is projected to grow by an average 1.0% per year, to 7.0 million by 2056.

'In contrast to the 2007 population age pyramid which shows a relatively wide base and middle with a sharply narrowing top, the 2056 age pyramids each show a relative narrowing of the younger age population and a broadening at the older ages'.

(ABS – Future Population Growth and Ageing 4102.0 – Australian Social Trends, March 2009)

An older population is less mobile, resulting in an increasing requirement for more accessible and equitable environments.

In 2003 the ABS estimated that *one in five people in Australia (3,958,300 or 20.0%) had a reported disability. Disability was defined as any limitation, restriction or impairment, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months and restricts everyday activities. Examples range from hearing loss which requires the use of a hearing aid, to difficulty dressing due to arthritis, to advanced dementia requiring constant help and supervision.*

The ABS reported that in 2003, 51% of people aged 60 years and over had a reported disability and 19% had a profound or severe core-activity limitation.

'Of all people aged 60 years and over, less than half (41%) reported needing assistance, because of disability or old age, to manage health conditions or cope with everyday activities. However, people aged 85 years and over reported a much higher need for assistance than those aged 60 to 69 years (84% compared with 26%).'

(ABS – 4430.0 - Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2003)

Accessible environments

Accessibility is not just about buildings – as persons with a disability require a continuous process of access linking information, transportation, public domain, built environments, and appropriate fixtures, fittings and equipment (FF&E).

More accessible and sustainable virtual and physical environments benefit everyone and this particularly applies to older and less mobile persons. An increasingly older society results in reduced mobility through temporary and permanent disabilities.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) provides a complaints based framework for more accessible and equitable environments. The intent of pending changes to the BCA through the ABCB Access to Premises Standard (APS) is to harmonise the DDA with the BCA.

(ABCB – Access to Premises Standard – 2009 – www.abcb.gov.au)

However this only applies to Class 3 to 10 buildings – with access provisions for Class 1 and 2 residential buildings relying on local authority requirements and relevant DCPs and Access Policies. An adaptable housing policy was investigated in 2005± by the NSW Department of Planning with proposed exemptions relating to unreasonable topographical or financial implications. The proposed policy included Australian Standard AS4299 and a similar policy has now been adopted in the UK through Part M legislation.

The NSW *Exempt and Complying Housing Code* includes development standards for installation of residential access ramps without DA approval. This results in optional rather that mandatory access to housing – and the Clauses should be modified to refer to accessible entries and the process of access.

(NSW Department of Planning – Housing Code 2008 – http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au)

In 2008 the Australian Government ratifies the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Accessibility Article 9 of the CRPD sets out the process of access and includes requirements for equitable information systems, transportation and housing.

(CRPD – UN Enable – http://www.un.org/disabilities)

Current situation

In Australia the process of access is not always implemented effectively or comprehensively. Information systems are not consistent, with minimal Braille and tactile signage, and lack of effective wayfinding.

Transportation provides a varying quality of infrastructure, with lack of audio and visual information systems, inconsistent transport image through varying graphics, colours, signage, fares etc, and rail upgrades to stations with inaccessible gaps or portable ramps at platform / carriage interface.

Public domains include irregular footpaths, lack of consistent kerb ramps at crossings, and minimal public seating.

Built environments benefit from progressive accessible construction of new public buildings, with very limited provision of adaptable and visitable housing, and no requirement to modify existing buildings except in conjunction with major upgrades or successful DDA complaints.

FF&E consists of generally institutional accessible fixtures and fittings, with limited range and generally higher cost for purpose built adaptations.

Critical issues for an ageing society are generally inaccessible public transportation and residential environments. Without major changes in attitude and process – most people approaching retirement today will have no choice but to move from current homes to retirement villages and nursing homes.

This is a grim outlook and major environmental changes are needed to provide better choices for older Australians.

Challenges & opportunities

Implementation of an effective process of access requires a comprehensive NSW government policy – with changes mainly relating to provision of accessible information, transport systems and housing stock.

Consistent and accessible signage and information is essential, and transportation must provide a consistent quality of infrastructure, with efficient audio and visual information systems, and accessible platform / carriage interface.

Public domains need consistent and accessible paths of travel with an equitable range of public seating, shade and rest areas.

Residential environments need a mainstream policy requiring all new housing stock to be visitable and adaptable – to provide increased opportunities for ageing in place and facilitate the changing requirements of an ageing population.

(PHOTO 1:   Accessible transit – Heathrow Terminal 5 – 2010)

(PHOTO 2:   Visitable housing – Sydney inner west – 2010)

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National experience includes a wide range of architectural, heritage and planning projects. He was 1974 to 1984 Chair of the Standards Australia Access Committee during resolution and adoption of the first AS1428 suite of standards.

From 2004 to 2008 Michael Fox was President of RI www.riglobal.org, a global network advancing the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. This included close involvement in the drafting, adoption and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by Australia in July 2008. From 1996 to 2004 he was Global Chair of ICTA, the RI International Commission on Technology and Accessibility.