Submission to

Children and Young People Committee, Parliament of New South Wales

Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment

by

Dr Brian Simpson

Senior Lecturer
School of Law
Keele University
United Kingdom
(until April 2006)

Associate Professor
School of Law
University of New England
Armidale
New South Wales
(from May 2006)

My submission focuses on the participation of children and young people in shaping the built environment. With respect to the terms of reference of the committee this submission addresses itself in particular to term of reference (1): 'trends, changes and issues for children and young people in the development, implementation and coordination of policy, design and planning for the built environment; and term of reference' (3): 'strategies to ensure that built environment issues affecting children and young people are readily identified and receive coordinated attention across portfolios and different levels of government'. Other relevant matters will be raised in addition that may not fall squarely within either of the above.

While there is a growing body of literature on the rights of children to participate in the design of the built environment it is still fair to say that this is an area that is under-theorised and yet to be taken up by many of those who practice in the planning and design of the built environment. It is also an area in need of greater engagement between those who have developed sophisticated frameworks regarding children's rights generally and those with specialist knowledge in spatial issues and design. It is my contention that at this point in time the various strands of thought which impact on children and the built environment remain diffuse and relatively disconnected.

1. The fundamental principle: children's right to good urban planning and design

It seems almost unassailable to state that children now have a right to participate in planning the built environment. This appears to flow seamlessly from article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which asserts for the child a 'right to express views in all matters affecting the child'. The right to participate in planning and designing the built environment is further enhanced by the Convention which claims for children the right to freedom of assembly and association (article 15), a right to an adequate standard of living (article 27) and a right to rest and leisure (article 31) for example. Moreover, it is the case that almost every right embodied within the Convention cannot be enjoyed or engaged in without proper urban space being allocated or appropriate buildings being provided. As a consequence every aspect of the built environment will impact on children in some way and so as per the Convention, they have a right to express their views about every development of that environment. Of course other human rights documents similarly create the

expectation that children should participate in the design of the built environment on the basis that to enjoy the various rights embodied in such documents as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, for example, the built environment must attain certain standards of design. In addition, domestic legislation which promotes principles of non-discrimination on the grounds of age, disability and gender, for example, leads to the same expectation. It also has to be accepted that Australia, in line with most of the world, recognises its obligations to promote the best interests of the child and that part of this obligation connects with the nature and design of the built environment.

It is important to remember that the inclusion of children in the planning and designing of the built environment is not, however, an end in itself. The reason for their participation in this process is to ensure that the outcome is the creation of buildings and spaces which meet the needs of all children who are users of that environment. It is in this sense that when such outcomes are achieved that urban planning and design might be described as 'good' – that is, participatory and inclusionary processes leading to well designed and relevant spaces for children.

However, it does seem at times that for many politicians, children's rights activists and sometimes even young people that it is participation alone that is the aim, and that children's participation in this context is a simple extension of calls for greater community participation in the formation of the built environment generally. Thus, one can find references such as in the Mant Report on urban design in Australia in 1994 which stated one of the most urgent urban design needs in Australia to be 'public fora and events to foster informed and open civic discourse and a sense of communal purpose'. (Mant, 1994, 13) In a similar vein, Glasgow's successful bid to become the City of Architecture and Design included the theme that that the process by which a city is created is as important as what is created and that the process should be open to everyone. (Glasgow, 1994, 9) While this may lead to 'good' design it is also clear that the process of participation can become more about a sense of 'ownership' of the decision making and not necessarily creating design outcomes which meet the needs of users. In other words, the process becomes the purpose, and more likely can easily lead to tokenistic forms of participation.

An example of this might be the panels of young people – usually in their early to mid-teens – convened by some city councils to 'involve' those young people in city design and planning. First, such panels replicate adult processes rather than address themselves to how children might participate in such matters. This may explain why they tend to involve older children who at least can appear to be engage as adults do in discussion. But this process does not deal with the participation of <u>all</u> children, and there is no question that infants and babies require different forms of participation to do so properly, as indeed even youths may require in fact. Second, because the participation model from which the idea of panels of young people springs forth adopts adult notions of participation it fails to address the question of the knowledge base from which children proceed. Clearly, participation is of little value if the children involved have little understanding of design issues or appreciation of architectural principles. In this sense 'participation' must include an educative aspect as well as the commitment of resources to place at children's disposal professional advice and expertise.

2. The problem of children's participation in designing the built environment

It is impossible to discuss meaningfully the participation of children in planning and designing the built environment without considering the various views of childhood which exist in the community. For some, the attraction of children's participation in planning and designing urban spaces will be that it will allow children to claim their space as children for their use now. But others will see children as 'future citizens' whereby their participation is part of their education for their future role as adults. In this latter conception of the child, the outcome is not necessarily going to be better designed cities for children but rather 'better designed children' who will evolve into adults who participate appropriately in society in the future.

We cannot disconnect the discussion of children and the built environment from our attitudes towards children in general. In 1997 I wrote:

> today the law tends to facilitate the control of children in urban spaces rather than to allow them to participate actively in the shaping of that environment and to enjoy its benefits on the same footing as adults. (Simpson, 1997: 909)

While it might be claimed by some that change has occurred in that period, on the other hand when one considers the rise of anti-social behaviour laws, the increased use of child curfews, and the increased surveillance and targeting of young people in shopping centres and in schools it seems that in fact little has changed. The stronger historical trend has been the increasing segregation of children into their own spaces. As Lasch wrote in 1995:

> Today it is the young who are professionally observed by an army of well-meaning adults, in settings deliberately set aside for pedagogical purposes. As a result, children and adolescents have less opportunity to improvise a social life of their own and to appropriate adult territory for their own use. Oldenburg points out that the suburban environment (which now includes the city as well, except for the deteriorating areas at its core) is not susceptible to 'user modification' by the young, who spend much of their time accordingly, in supervised activities confined to places designated for the exclusive use of young people. (Lasch, 1995: 126)

This is not to say that some children do not attempt to appropriate territory for their own use. But the response of such appropriation is often in terms of how that 'taking over' or space by young people 'vandalises', 'intimidates' or 'annoys' other 'legitimate' users of that space. This, of course, tends to be said of older children who use space in this way, but witness the notion that young children should not play in certain areas at certain times and in certain ways to see how all children are caught up in this reaction. What it also says is that children are not usually legitimate users of territory save those spaces specially designed for them. Thus attempts to appropriate territory by young people often harden notions about the segregation of children rather than lead to questioning about their need for space in cities and how that space should be redefined as a consequence.

The manner in which we segregate children spatially creates a problem for the participation of children in urban planning and design as it can lead to a series of assumptions about what children have an interest in. In other words, without careful thought about the nature of childhood and which aspects of the built environment affect children and what it means to be a child, the participation of children in the built environment can descend into trivial discussions about the colour of walls in a building and whether spaces are 'child friendly' without really understanding what that means. It may also assume that children should be 'included' in the design of certain spaces – schools, playgrounds, skateparks, and perhaps shopping malls – but

not included in areas which are not 'children's areas' or legitimately used by children. In other words it is possible to create a discourse around children's participation in the design of the built environment which reinforces current perceptions of the place of children in the city instead of transforming the city through the inclusion of children in its design. Is the question whether children are to be included in city design, or is it instead whether the city is to include a sense of the child?

We also need to ask whether the process of including children in planning and designing the built environment is to create cities which reflect the child as citizen today, or whether the process is about the child as a future citizen. This is pivotal to what participation means for children in this area. Many who work with children in designing their environments favour the former view and seek to put the child's sense of place into the built environment. This is not about segregating children and removing them to purpose built spaces for children, but is instead about challenging how cities think about children and their place in the built environment.

But others clearly design for children, or more accurately their sense of the child's place in the built environment. This can often be about social control and keeping children in their place, though it can also be well meaning where it is based on a belief that including children in processes about the built environment is seen to be part of their development into competent adults. The problem is that this does not concern itself with the present lives of children and seek to necessarily build spaces which reflect the needs of children today.

Thus, the participation of children in planning and designing the built environment is problematic conceptually as well as in practice, and it is therefore important to come to a view about these matters before the discussion can proceed in a meaningful manner.

3. Children's 'participation' in planning, or why the 'child friendly cities movement' is only part of the answer

A particularly useful discussion about the participation of children in planning cities is offered by Francis and Lorenzo (2002). Their analysis clarifies how different ideas about children's participation in urban planning and design affect the reality of that

participation. They outline what they describe as the 'seven realms of children's participation', each with its advantages and disadvantages.

The first realm they identify is the 'romantic realm' which sees 'children as planners'. It began from the movement to involve children in designing their playgrounds dating back to the 1970s. As they state 'this led some to conclude that children were the best designers and builders of environments for themselves.'(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 160) This realm is in many ways the foundation for many other realms of children's participation in urban planning as it is firmly based on the notion of the child's right to participate and accepts that children have something to contribute to the process. However, Francis and Lorenzo identify an important limitation in this approach in that it ignores the extent to which the adult participants in planning processes which include children overrule the children's ideas.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 160) This is still of contemporary relevance as it underscores the problematic nature of simply including children in the process without providing them with the knowledge base and skills to participate effectively and the resources to meet the possible objections of adults and other interest groups.

The second realm Francis and Lorenzo identify is the 'advocacy realm' or 'planners for children' approach.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 160) This developed directly from advocacy planning in the 1960s which saw planners representing the interests of the poor and powerless in planning issues.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 160) One important limitation of this approach of course is that children were 'advocated for' and not directly involved in the process.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 160)

The third realm is the 'needs realm' or 'social scientists for children.' Approach (Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 160) This is thought to be the most published area to do with children's participation in the built environment.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 160) It is summarised by Francis and Lorenzo:

> Researchers have shown that children have unique needs that should be considered in designing environments. This has included studies that show the importance of nature, and vegetation for children. It also includes research that has demonstrated the differences of children growing up in rural and urban environments. In addition studies have shown the importance of the larger neighbourhood environment as a setting for

children and the needs of adolescents in built and natural environments.
(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 162)

The limitation of this approach is that it assumes that children's needs can be identified by good social science and that they do not need to be directly involved in the process.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 163)

The fourth realm is the 'learning realm' ('children as learners') which sees the process as one which has learning outcomes. Thus children may be taught architectural appreciation, become engaged in built environment education and projects about learning from landscapes.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 163) One problem with this approach is that adults (teachers and other professionals) usually set the curriculum and children do not directly influence content as a result.

The fifth realm is the 'rights realm' ('children as citizens'). It is this realm that draws most heavily on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and it is the approach which underpins the Child Friendly Cities movement. In this realm children are seen as fully empowered participants. While this is regarded as an 'important' evolution in urban planning being based on notions of 'democracy, rights and empowerment', Francis and Lorenzo still regard this approach as having the limitation that 'it tends to focus on children's rights and less on their environmental needs.'(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 164) I would reinforce that point by suggesting that this approach can be pre-occupied with the process of participation and the inclusion of children in a manner which can hark back to the romantic realm. The objective outcomes also need to be remembered and the question asked whether the process produces better cities, built spaces and places for children.

The sixth realm identified is the 'institutional realm' or 'children as adults' approach. This is a more recent development which treats children as adults and assumes that they have the same knowledge and power as adults.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 164) But as Francis and Lorenzo state, 'well intended, this realm often ignores the importance of more spontaneous and child-centred participation. It often results in limited environmental change or ideas that run counter to what children really want.'(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 164)

The final realm is the 'proactive realm' or 'participation with vision' approach.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 164) This is best explained by Francis and Lorenzo:

> It moves beyond traditional forms of children's participation that simply involves children to one directed at empowering children and adults to reinvent childhood and the places that support it. It recognizes children as children not just young adults that must behave and participate as adults. It attempts to not be just nostalgic about childhood but seeks to find ways to use planning and design to recreate childhood.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 164)

This realm also links very strongly with the sustainable cities movement.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 164) There are limitations in this approach: in particular that planners and designers may need special training to know how to work within it.(Francis and Lorenzo, 2002: 165) Francis and Lorenzo provide examples of this approach from their own work in designing communities where spaces which were not specifically designed for children provide 'important opportunities and spaces for children.' For example, in one community unstructured play areas such as vineyards and orchards were designed in and children were directly involved in the design of the landscape. Some of this inclusion of children was achieved through having children 'map' their favourite places by taking photographs with instant cameras. The maps produced assisted in the design of the playground area. Such approaches also challenge the notion of certain areas being for children and others being not for children. We need to see our cities as not only places of commerce and tourism but also as playgrounds for children and spaces for them to learn from and shape.(see e.g. Simpson, 2005)

This experience highlights the imaginative ways in which children's participation has to be considered. At the Designing With and For Children conference organised by Action for Children's Arts in London in January 2006, many who attended took the view that all children can be included in the design of their environments through creative thinking about how children of varying ages can participate. Even very young children and babies can be included if the right approach is taken.

It can be seen from this latter approach to children's participation that the aim is not about creating future citizens but designing into the built environment the needs of children of all ages based on their present status as children. It is also about producing

9

outcomes which provide spaces for children in cities and the built environment which acknowledge the needs and presence of children and permits them to shape the city and so construct their childhood. It is not simply about process, although that is an important part of what is to be achieved, but about what can be achieved to change cities and recreate them as sustainable places that reflect the place of children within them.

4. Practising children's participation in urban planning design
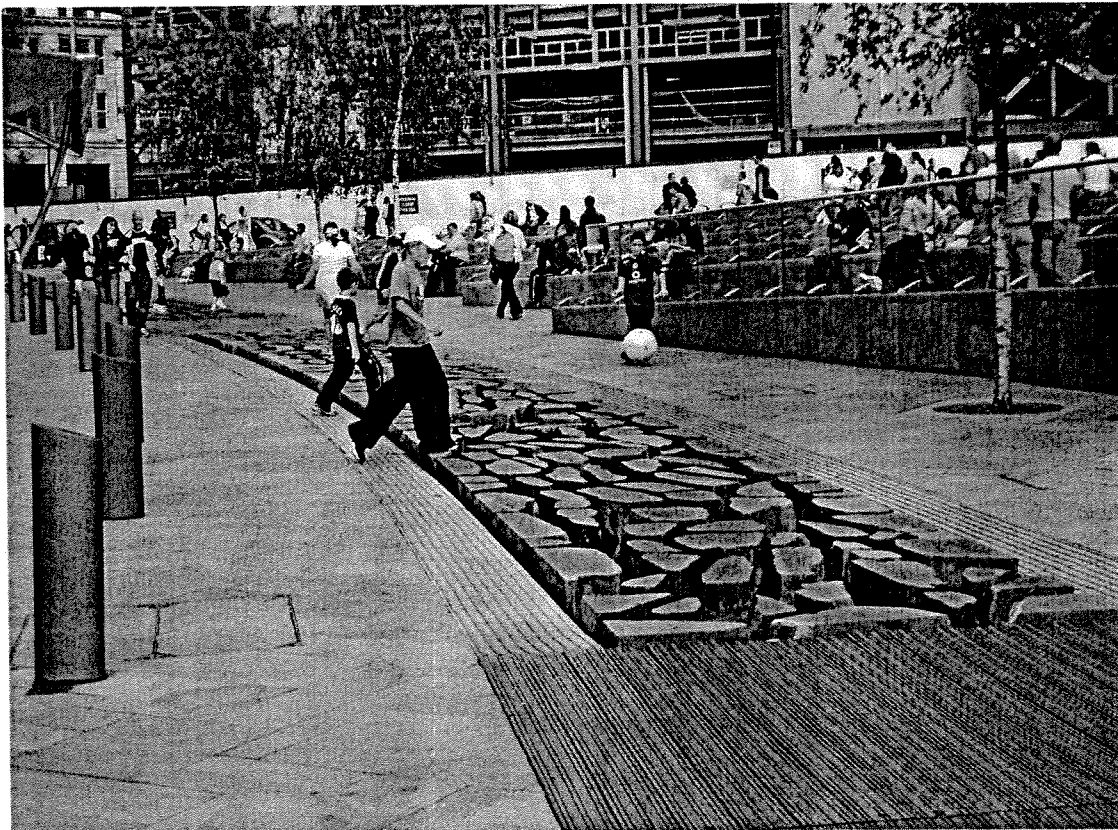
There are many examples of good urban design which include children (although whether by design or default is not always clear however as in the example above from the city centre in Manchester where a piece of street art is appropriated by children as a play space) but it seems still more common to see design which in effect excludes children. As part of this we tend to label our cities in ways which ostensibly suggest a concern with safety but in effect send messages to children about their activities being unwelcome within the city. It is not simply a matter of accepting children's presence in the city we also have to accept what they like to do when they are present! The following sign also appears in the centre of Manchester in a green space surrounded by motorised (wheeled) traffic.
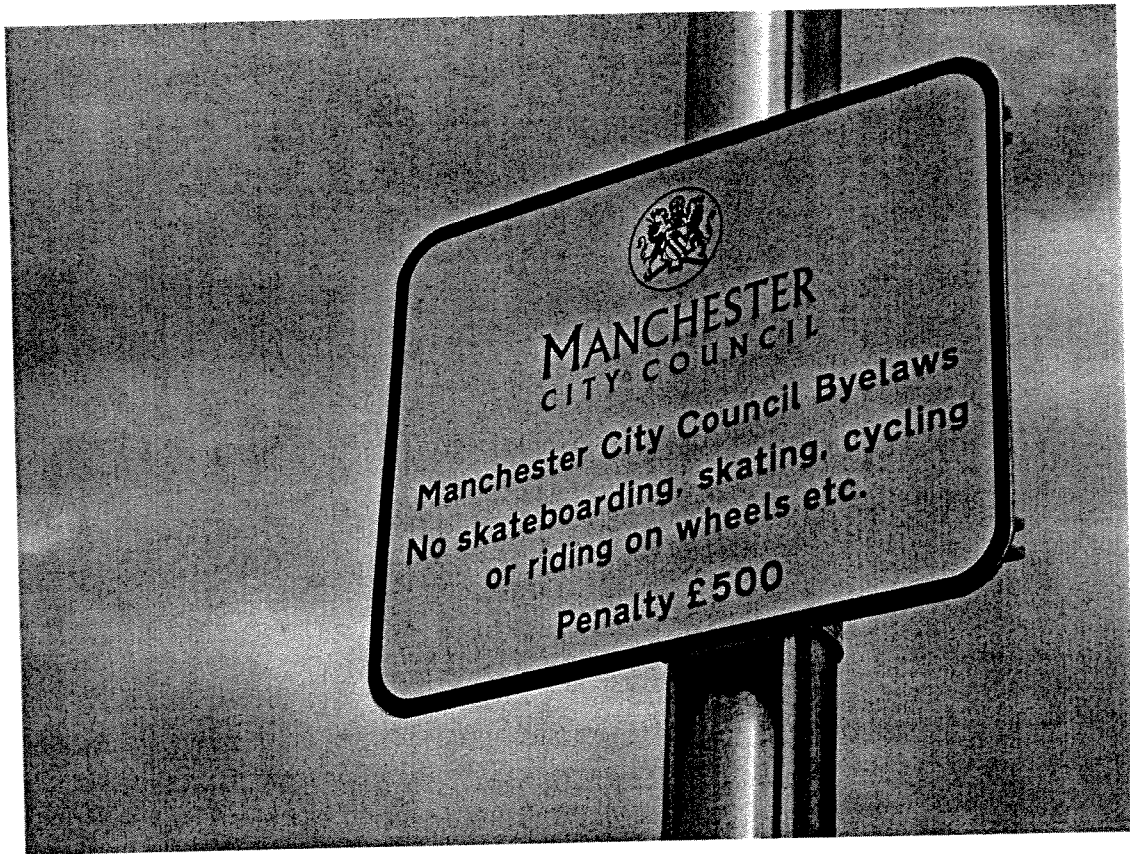
But is a child friendly city simply a city which has a few designated spaces for children to play and to feel that some spaces are for them? Clearly not. There is a lot of important work being done which takes the inclusion of children in urban planning and design well beyond this objective. At the Designing With and For Children workshop in London (mentioned above) Sally Goldsworthy from the Discover Centre in Stratford, East London (a project which has involved children in the design of a children's centre) described how the children having acquired various skills and completed the design of the children's centre have now moved on to input their views on the regeneration of their local area which takes in part of the site for the London Olympics. Working with the Stratford City Partnership they are now taking forward their aim in children's participation in the built environment, viz, 'to teach the adults to think like children.'

Martin Drury formerly of The Ark in Dublin (a children's arts centre) also spoke at the workshop. He spoke of the need to recognise the 'presentness' of children, that they are citizens here and now and that their needs as children must be recognised, and that in judging the appropriateness or excellence of an outcome in this context

one has to do so from the child's perspective not from the standpoint of an adult. Through art children can shape their childhood – we may ask where in our cities are the opportunities for all children to shape their childhood?

Educating children about urban planning and city design

A common theme in much of the discussions about children's participation in urban planning that has emerged is the need to provide the skills to children to make that participation meaningful. In the United Kingdom organisations such as the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and Open House (see www.openhouse.org.uk) have projects specifically aimed at raising the awareness of children about their built environment. The Child Friendly Calgary project in Canada has, I understand, run courses in schools about city planning.

But such education must have a curriculum and it is at this point that we need to return to the realms described by Francis and Lorenzo. If we adopt the proactive realm then that education of children must link with issues of sustainability, the need to also train the professionals who plan and build our cities and other urban spaces and to connect with the idea that the participation of children has the important objective to allow children to imagine their own childhood and then have that childhood reflected in the places in which they live. This is not simply a process to produce good future citizens, but one which should permit children to define their own citizenship now.

Summary and Recommendations

I would suggest that the following are pivotal in advancing the participation of children in planning and designing the built environment:

1. The fundamental principle that the child has a right to good architecture and urban design must be recognised, and that this includes the direct participation of children in the planning and design process.
2. To be meaningful the participation of children in planning and design of the built environment must be properly resourced. This means the provision of appropriate forms of education about the built environment and the provision of professional advice and expertise are essential for real participation to

12

occur. Professionals involved in design and planning must also become skilled in working with children.

3. The participation of children must mean <u>all</u> children do so. This means that the modes of participation need to be adapted for the relevant age group. The processes should be constructed for children to enable all people to see the city through the child's eyes.

4. The purpose of including children in planning and designing the built environment is to ensure that the spaces we build reflect the needs of children as present citizens and that children are empowered to create their childhood through the built environment.

5. The inclusion of children in planning the built environment should connect with notions of sustainability and recognition that through including children in the planning and design process we are able to challenge traditional ideas about the use of space and so create more adaptable and sustainable cities.

Brian Simpson

31 January 2006

Children in Urban Planning and Urban Space Bibliography

ANAND, R. (1987) *Task Force on the Law Concerning Trespass to Publicly-Used Property as it Affects Youth and Minorities*. (Toronto: Ministry of the Attorney General)

BARNARD, J. (1980) Children in the Built Environment: Guidelines for Planning and Design. (Melbourne: Georgian House)

BARTLETT, S. et al (1999) Cities for Children: Children's Rights, Poverty and Urban Management (London, UNICEF)

DRISKELL, D. (2002) Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth: A Manual for Participation (UNESCO)

FRANCIS, M. and LORENZO, R. (2002) Seven Realms of Children's Participation' *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Vol. 22, 157-169.

GLASGOW (1994) 1999: The Glasgow Bid. Glasgow: 1999 Information Office.

JAMES, S. (1990) Is there a ` place' for children in geography? *Area*, 22, pp. 278-283.

KNOWLES-YÁNEZ, K.L. (2005) Children's Participation in Planning Processes *Journal of Planning Literature*, Vol. 20, No.1, pp.3-14.

LASCH, C. (1995) The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy. (New York: W. W. Norton)

MANT, J. (1994) Urban Design in Australia: Report by the Prime Minister' s Urban Design Task Force (The Mant Report) (Canberra: AGPS)

NASAW, D. (1985) *Children of the City*. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday)

ROBINS, N. (1996) Shopping centre development and youth consultations, *Youth Studies Australia*, 15, pp. 37-38.

SIMPSON, B. and SIMPSON, C. (1993) The use of curfews to control juvenile offending in Australia: managing crime or wasting time?, *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 5, pp. 85-96.

SIMPSON, B. (1997) Towards the Participation of Children and Young People in Urban Planning and Design *Urban Studies*, Vol. 34, Nos 5-6, pp. 907-925.

SIMPSON, B. (1998) 'Inappropriate or Inevitable? The Role of the Law in Planning for the Illicit Leisure Activities of Young People' in S.Scraton (ed) *Leisure, Time and Space: Meanings and Values in People's Lives* (LSA Publication No.57, Brighton), pp.147-165.

SIMPSON, B. (2005) 'Cities as Playgrounds: Active Leisure for Children as a Human Right' in J.Caudwell & P.Bramham (eds) *Sport, Active Leisure and Youth Culture* (LSA Publication No. 86, Brighton,), pp.3-23.

VALENTINE, G. (1996) Children should be seen and not heard: the production and transgression of adults' public space, *Urban Geography*, 17, pp. 205-220.