The changing character of public space
Implications for young people and community action

(Notes from a presentation given at the YACVic Space Invaders Forum, June 2005)

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There is substantial blurring between what we have traditionally categorised as public and private space. A range of community functions are being re-located to privately owned or managed spaces, as well as many forms of public space becoming privitised and/or commodified. The result is many forms of what could be termed 'hybrid' or 'community accessed' space which cannot be defined simply by considering ownership or function.

This is occurring in the context of rapidly changing urban landscapes. Some features of this include:

- the loss, fragmentation and commodification of natural environments such as bushland., coastal fringes and water courses;
- the development of urban precincts and planned 'communities';
- the quest by cities for continued economic growth and the link between this and the development of 'livable' cities and towns attractive to investment;
- the individualisation of risk and as part of this the trend for 'feelings' of security to assume heightened importance in urban design and management. The propensity for authorities to adopt 'move on' policing strategies is an example of this;
- an increased focus on 'localism' with particular localities targeted for intervention around disadvantage.

The pace of urban development and strength of the factors driving are such that opportunities to influence it are uneven and limited.

Public space is the site of numerous tensions between competing principles, policies, processes and people. These tensions regarding young people's use of various forms of public space often arise from a combination of:

• Limited amenity for young people including a paucity of "things to do";

• The way a space is designed;

• The way the space connects to its surrounds;

• Large numbers of young people using a particular space at a particular time;

• Interactions between young people and authorities;

• Behaviour- most commonly behaviour that is considered unsafe, annoying or 'anti-social' by some others rather than behaviour that is criminal;

• Difficult situations young people are in eg affected by substances, and/or their marginalisation from other areas of life eg homelessness.

Public spaces play a range of important roles in the lives of young people. They are critical sites for what has become termed 'youth development', acting as venues for learning and developing social competence, independence and interdependence. Public spaces both allow and require people to interact with others, known and unknown to them. From this perspective youth inclusive public spaces are needed because 'they' need them.

The second purpose of public spaces for young people is pragmatic. Young people as a sectio of the commuity have a relatively high dependence on public spaces by virtue of their increased dependence on public transport and public venues. This dependence (and thus visibility) arises from regulatory and economic constraints such as age limitations on vehicle licensing and their more limited access to age restricted and user pays 'out of home' venues for leisure and interaction.

Public spaces are also critical venues for realising citizenship and fostering a fair and decent (inclusive) society. A democracy requires public spaces which encourage the widest diversity of people to have access, gather and interact. From this perspective young people as members of the community who have the right to participate in economic, social and cultural life and as such are legitimate users of public spaces. The alternative is for young people to be simply considered as 'other', as outside the community. Within this frame various conceptions of citizenship exist and notions of mutuality are now emphasised in some of these.

I offer a pragmatic vision or set of principles for considering the character of public spaces if they are to be inclusive of young people. These are:

• That economic and social vibrancy can be considered jointly. Indeed social vibrancy contributes to economic vibrancy.
• That inclusion involves young people being seen and treated as part of the community, as members of families, as well as being individuals or an age cohort;
• That the greatest challenges involve the inclusion of those most marginalized, who are also members of the community, of families as well as being individuals;

• That public spaces are venues for building connection and wellbeing (developmental frame);

• Where we should be safe and feel safe; and

• Should be 'youth friendly'.

In recent years there has developed a widespread interest in the linkages between spacial development and social amenity. This translates to a potentially broad coalition of people who share some concern about what is happening in respect of public spaces. There is political vulnerability about this adequacy kept alive by various unresolved tensions and

continuing pressures, the manifestations of which are frequently reported and debated in the media.
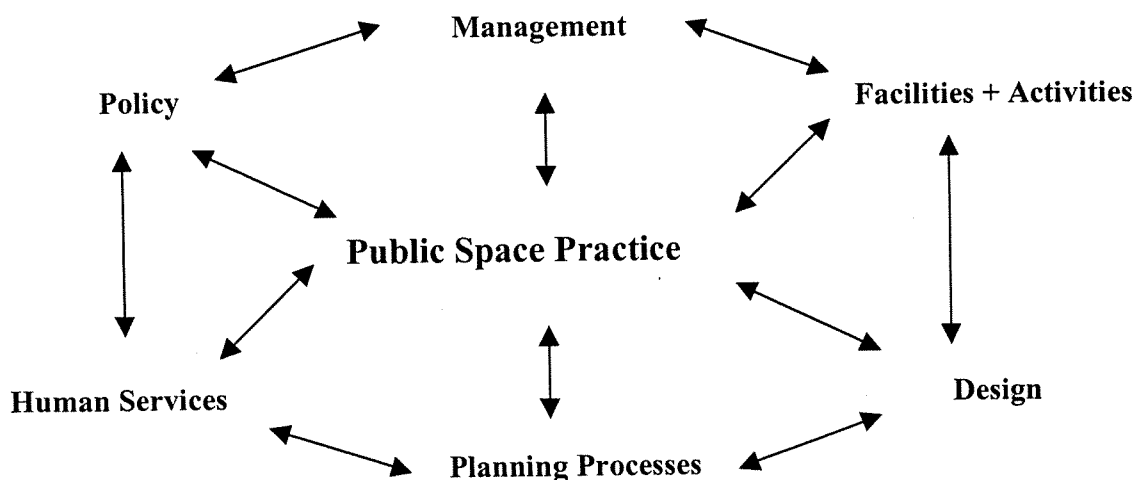
For a complex of reasons, which are not able to be explored here, the resolution of pressures and issues regarding young people often takes the form of increased regulation, displacement and/or specific provisions to encourage 'purposeful activity' by young people. Such responses are usually underpinned by a behaviourist logic- that the issue is about discouraging or encouraging young people in respect of particular behaviours. In order to see a broader range of options that have more constructive potential there is a need for a broader framework to be used which draws on cross-sectional and cross-disciplinary perspectives.

There are a number of key frames of local governance that we need to strategically and creatively work with. These include:
•Safety;
•Risk management;
•Economic and infrastructure development (growth and livability);
•Managing physical infrastructure;
•Health and wellbeing (resilience);
•Locality focused planning and intervention (precincts, place management);
•Community participation; and
•Youth development.

There is a strong need for appreciating that public space interventions may occur in one of a number of arenas. Further it is common for responses to occur within one arena without appreciating that an effective response may often require consideration of the various contributing factors leading to 'the issue' and utilise responses that are drawn across or use multiple arenas. Figure 1 below depicts 6 common arenas for offers a

Figure 1   Arenas of Public Space Practice

Management

Policy

Facilities + Activities

Public Space Practice

Human Services

Design

Planning Processes

Some considerations which exist in relation to each of these (by no means exhaustive):

Management
- Making sure laws and regulations foster inclusive communities managed responsibly.
- Responding to critical incidents or tensions manifested in public space in a way that deals effectively with the short term issues and also lays the foundation for the ongoing availability of inclusive public space.

Planning Processes
- How could young people be involved in the planning of future developments?
- Incorporating an integrated community space strategy into CBD planning.

Design
- Designing young people in not out
- Young people as designers
- Young people's involvement in designing neighbourhood streetscapes

Policy

- Development of laws, regulations, contract specifications and endorsed policies which have the effect of recognising and reinforcing the central place of public spaces in the lives of all people in the community, including young people ie which taken together an inclusive effect
  - Police powers and responsibilities
  - Criminal law
  - Local laws
  - Town planning law
  - Contract law in privately owned publicly accessed spaces eg access guarantees to public transport at shopping centres
  - Other policies that condition expectations eg Youth Charter, endorsed public space guidelines.

It is particularly important to consider the differential impact of laws and policies on those who are marginalised and address the deeper social attitudes and processes which perpetuate exclusion.

- Site specific or local youth protocols
  A protocol is useful when the gains or clarifications made are likely to be short lived if a written, ongoing agreement is not reached. A protocol can assist in the institutionalisation of inclusive practice (Crane, Adkins and Marston 2000 Brokering Inclusion).

  The energy for protocols often arises out of a 'crisis'
  Protocols can facilitate cultural shifts in the way a space is managed
  Protocols can result in more inclusion or be a new layer of regulation

Facilities and Activities
- A range of affordable, accessible facilities and activities which are important to young people, developed, managed and reviewed with them.
- Legitimising passive as well as active leisure options (and recognising the interface between these)
- Young people's art in public spaces
- Recognising and valuing youth cultures and expression

Interface with Human Services
- Available, visible and relevant human services for young people

Linking these arenas of practice together into more integrated public space strategies.

Rather than assuming the response should be in one arena the analysis and the possible options for response can be from a range of arenas so as to address both presenting and underlying factors. Action in one or more arena may alleviate issues in another. For example an issue may present as a management of behaviour issue but be underpinned by

design deficiencies and a lack of amenity that in turn results in 'facility stress' not allowing cooperative use of the space by multiple groups of users.

What can we do, or advocate that others do?

Response options can also be thought of generically as including one or more of the following:

•**UNDERSTAND** the space, use and the contexts that condition it. It is essential that responses to public space issues and challenges first 'understand' the space and the tensions within it.

•**WAIT** (Is this the issue to respond to? Right time?)

•**FACILITATE/** encourage an inclusive (usually local) process

•**NEGOTIATE** more inclusive alternatives

•**PROVIDE** resources (material, physical, experiential, cultural)

•**REGULATE**: make law/endorsed policy more inclusive

•**INTEGRATE** responses across 2 or more arenas

Some specific strategies those working with and for young people can encourage the adoption of:

- Endorsement of a clear policy statement which commits to an inclusive approach;
- Maximise participation which is seen as meaningful by a diversity young people eg through using participatory action research;
- Develop strategies which respond to the connection between public space issues and young people's need for other resources/ supports eg housing options, accredited education and training, supportive families, youth mental health services;
- Identify, circulate and affirm best practice principles and guidelines for inclusive public space planning, design and management for young people;
- Include considerations about teenagers in family friendly planning and design;
- Respond to 'hot' spots and issues in a way that engages, understands, involves and problem solves. Avoid an over-reliance on law and order approaches;
- Develop one (or more) youth related inclusive public space initiatives to build local expertise and confidence;
- Reward and publicise youth friendly public space initiatives;
- Consider how current youth and cultural development funding can articulate to better public space outcomes;

- Develop state/ local multi-disciplinary forum/s for considering public space issues and futures;
- Support other stakeholders struggling with public space tensions to develop inclusive and communicative responses eg shopping centre managements; and
- Incorporate a consideration of inclusion into safety audits and plans (including the application of CPTED).

A wide range of resources on young people and public space can be found on the Yspace website at www.yspace.net

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