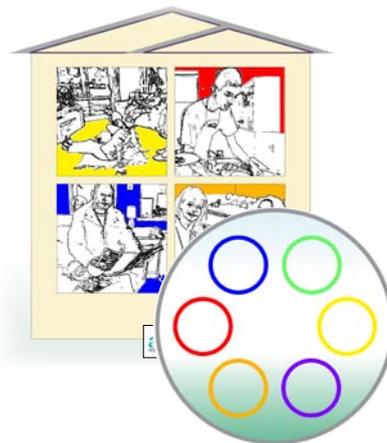


It is the neighbourhood - not the house - that matters



Seeking independent living opportunities for adults with intellectual disability

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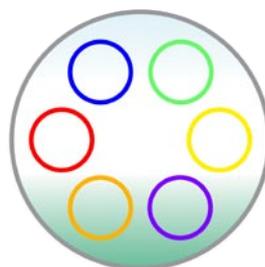


Our neighbourhoods need to be safe, accessible and inclusive places to live work and play. Everyone, especially the most vulnerable in our community, deserves the opportunity to live independently of the family home, if, and when they choose.

Upwards of 670,000 Australian live with an intellectual disability (ABS, 2016). Many of these are young adults seeking opportunities to live independently outside of the family home (Wiesel & Bigby, 2015).

They, like others their age, want to be able to choose where they live and with whom they live.

A young adult with Down syndrome or Autism may not necessarily require a purpose built house or apartment to live independently. Having attended mainstream education and now competing in the mainstream workforce, many 'may not identify particularly' *continued page 12*



strongly as “a person with a disability”, but rather as a unique individual who merely happens to have a disability’ (Taleporos et al., 2013, p 15). With the appropriate support and funding they are able to live in a normal house, alone or sharing with others (Bigby, 2000).

So if the house or apartment is not an issue, can we expect adults with intellectual disability to live anywhere?

A research project on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland Australia is currently exploring why some neighbourhoods offer better independent living opportunities than other neighbourhoods. The aim is to determine the neighbourhood values and functions that are important to achieve independent living for adults with intellectual disability (adults). Data has been collected through interviews with young adults (18-40 years old), their families and subject matter experts in the disability, housing and built environment sectors.

We asked them about design features of ‘ideal’ neighbourhoods. This incorporated questions regarding the engineering and planning elements of the area. We asked participants to tell us about what, in a neighbourhood, makes them feel welcome and safe in a community.

In brief, the results indicate that what is needed to support an independent living opportunity, is a house in a street where neighbours are friendly and supportive, there is good reliable public transport and there is an identifiable inclusive community.

More specifically, the adults interviewed indicated that they want to be close to family and friends and live where they have a connection to place. For example, they want to reside in a neighbour-

hood that is familiar to them, so that they can feel safe. A place where they know the transport system and the work and educational opportunities available to them. They were more likely to have access to work and recreational opportunities in a community where they, and their families, are known. Inclusiveness and conviviality are also maximised for an adult where they feel welcome and can be involved in community life (Wiesel & Bigby, 2016).

So where are these streets?

The theoretical concept of the Just City (Fainstein, 2010), which has as its foundation the principals of democracy, equity and diversity, underpins our exploration of neighbourhoods and their design. The premise is that the inclusion of specific neighbourhood design elements in the delivery of new and refurbished neighbourhoods will help provide more independent living opportunities for adults. Neighbourhood design based on the concepts of democracy, equity and diversity form the foundation of Just City neighbourhoods (Fainstein, 2010). This theoretical concept is not new to Australian urban design research (Bostock & Gleeson, 2004; Gleeson, 2001; Steele et al., 2012).

However in recognising the complexity in determining the combination of components required to establish an ideal neighbourhood, new approaches have been used. A human factors and sociotechnical systems analysis (STS) was applied to the data gathered through a best practice literature review and the interviews. We consider the neighbourhood as a system of interrelated objects and functions. For example, we explored the roles that streets, pets, recreation, employment, education, transport, tolerance and diversity, have in the entire system we call a ‘neighbourhood’. In total more than 210 elements have been included in the system.

It is the neighbourhood

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In line with this human factors approach we consider:

- people as assets in the system
- technology as a tool to assist people
- promotion of quality of life
- respect for individual differences
- responsibility of all stakeholders.

What is needed to achieve ideal neighbourhoods?

Three high level functions were identified as crucial in the design of new or refurbished neighbourhoods. These are:

- The actual and perceived safety within the neighbourhood and, in particular, in the street;
- The ease of mobility to access services, recreation and employment opportunities, whether it be walking, cycling or public transport; and
- A sense of community that encourages local neighbourhood activity and participatory inclusion.

To achieve these functions diversity within the neighbourhood is understood to be critical. Neighbourhood design needs to encourage a diverse mix of residents. A mixed residential demographic is effective in minimising the vulnerability of adults to abuse, corruption and the exploitation to behave inappropriately or illegally (Robinson & Chenoweth, 2012). To create a diversity in the neighbourhood demography there needs to be a diversity in the types, scale and intensity of buildings, a variety of residential accommodation and tenure types and a mix of commercial operations.

Ideal neighbourhoods are 'near to things'. Adults want to be able to get to 'work', to see their friends and family and to be able to continue doing the things they do while living at home. The fear of

change - change of doctor, bus service, or sporting team - creates a barrier for many adults who want to experience independent living.

These young adults, having been encouraged to participate in mainstream life, have a need to be part of a community. Social, recreational and employment opportunities typically provide convivial engagement with in a neighbourhood (Wiesel & Bigby, 2016). It is acknowledged that community education to help residents understand the behaviours and needs of adults with disability goes a long way to promoting inclusion in neighbourhoods (Putnam, 1995). The harnessing of the social capital within a neighbourhood would surely contribute to the overall success of independent living for an adult.

Why are we not delivering these neighbourhoods?

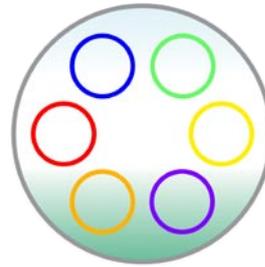
The answer to this question may lie in urban design and planning. In Australia the design and delivery of neighbourhoods is at the local government level in strategic planning. However, this strategic planning is reliant on State and Commonwealth government legislation and funding.

In systematically scrutinising legislation at all levels of government, it becomes apparent that a complex web of policies, guidelines and government departments exist, often in isolation, to influence urban design. The complexity for built environment sector of operating in this multifaceted and multilevel bureaucracy compounds the delivery of 'ideal' neighbourhoods.

How we propose to influence the delivery of ideal neighbourhoods.

Using the Rasmussen (1997) STS method, we have developed a neighbourhood design framework.

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Parents, disability and social housing and built environment delivery decision makers can use this tool to better assess neighbourhood design for safety, accessibility and inclusivity. This framework has been developed using the interview and literature review data. It has been workshopped with parents, urban designers and planners, social housing and policy sector experts and further refined before being applied by parents actively seeking independent living opportunities. A process of sample testing the framework on old, new and refurbished neighbourhoods on the Sunshine Coast is underway. As a final test the framework will be applied in a practical setting by urban designers and planners.

The aim is to ensure this framework is a practical tool for parents, the disability and social housing sectors and for the built environment design and delivery industry across the globe.

Neighbourhoods that are good for this group of people should inevitably be good for us all. ●

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Bio:

Cate MacMillan has several qualifications Dip Teach HPE & Geography (KGCAE), Grad Dip Teach Exceptional Children (USQ) & BBus Property Economics & Development (USC).

She is currently undertaking a PhD in Urban Planning by Research with the Centre for Human Factors and Sociotechnical Systems at USC. Cate's career as a secondary school teacher and principal in primary and secondary schools in Queensland, always had a focus on the inclusion and education of young adults with disabilities.