

Designing with Children

Dapto Dreaming

Horsley is a neighbourhood in the small suburban town of Dapto on the outskirts of the City of Wollongong, a seaside city in Australia. Planning a new residential area, the urban development company Stockland chose to hire researcher Karen Malone from University of West Sydney, to conduct an independent, participative project with local children. The project was planned to provide an opportunity for local children to be active agents of change, by including their own visions and experiences of growing up in the area and proposing to Stockland how to design a child-friendly environment.

The study was based on the global Child-Friendly Cities (CFC) initiative framework, following the paradigm of children's rights. Drawing on a number of studies about child-friendliness and children's independent mobility, Karen Malone used the methods and tools which have grown out of her involvement in the UNESCO participatory research project, Growing up in Cities.

Motivation

From the beginning this project was intended as an authentic process of action research, using child-focused participatory workshops to allow children to be dreamers, designers and agents of change. Following the findings from her previous studies, Malone had developed a strong ethos of believing in the right of children to have a say about issues related to their living environment. Stockland's aim was to develop a design brief that would reflect the thoughts and opinions of local children. Describing the project, Stockland stated that *'The CFC Research and Community Engagement Project is proposed by Stockland with the vision of creating a 'child-friendly', socially sustainable community consistent with Stockland's Residential Sustainability Strategy'*.

Children's involvement

In order to inform the new urban development, a 'child-friendliness survey' was conducted –

What

A play area in a new housing development

Where

Dapto, Australia

Age

5-10

Group Size

150

Project Stage

Brief, Concept, Design Development

Children's Roles

Advocates for Change, Clients, Creative Inspirers, Expert Consultants

Timescale

April to July of 2011

Partners

Karen Malone (Architect, researcher)
James Mather Delaney (Landscape architect)
Stockland (Property developer)
Residents and children from Horsley (Participants)
Ric McConaghy (Outdoor play space designer)

involving in-class workshops and child-guided tours. The research team worked with children of the local Dapto Public School, including the kindergarten (30 × 5–6-year-olds and 120 × 9–10-year-olds), alongside a group of supporting adults, which included a play consultant and artist, local indigenous advisors, Stockland staff and the Stockland landscape architect. Slightly different methods were used according to the age group.

In their first session, the kindergarten children explored their opinions and experiences of the local area and in their second they focused on their dreams for a child-friendly Dapto, using drawings to express their thoughts and ideas. These were explained and discussed with the researchers. Using a storytelling strategy, the researchers also carried out individual interviews with the children and on this basis completed a Child Friendly Cities (CFC) survey on his or her behalf.

Grade 5 children took part in three sessions: the first focusing on the children's mobility (using an existing survey technique); the second session exploring children's perspectives on and experiences of the local area (including the CFC survey, drawing their neighbourhood and individual photo survey over a weekend); and in the third session the children developed, communicated and represented their dreams for a child-friendly Dapto environment. Ideas also emerged spontaneously during the research, such as the idea of an adventure pathway between the Horsley and Brooks Reach neighbourhoods, connecting the school to the play area.

A group of 12 children carried on working with the adult researchers to collate and analyse the survey, photographic and drawing data. The children identified key themes in this data which they then represented in thematic collages, using the generated drawings and photographs. These themes formed the child-friendliness indicators for Horsley, which became the basis of the research report and an evaluative framework for the future design proposals. This active move to include children in the analysis phase valued children as producers of their own stories and was chosen in part to increase the validity of the data.

A student commented on the workshop activities: *'I liked it because we got to get out of the classroom and go to the site; it was more interesting than sitting in a classroom. I would do it or something similar again. It's good kids get to be part of it and make a difference.'*

The closure of the project included a celebration of the children's designs, which served as an opportunity for other children and local community members to discuss their own visions with Stockland staff and city council staff.

Outputs and outcomes

The children were asked what they liked most about the participatory process through a semi-structured interview three months after the workshops took place:

'Being able to help, proud that we were part of the design of the playground';

'Doing stuff on the interactive board, going out onto the site, working with James. Looking forward to seeing it finished';

'I got to be part of it with my friends';

'I liked that I got to help design it – now it feels like I own it somehow';

'We will make sure our friends go down to the playground and make sure Stocklands built the way they said they would'; and

'I liked everything of the project and especially being creative. No one really questioned why I spent my Friday afternoons doing it. I talked to lots of my friends about it'.

The final 'Dapto Dreaming' report was produced for children by the children, and it showed the *'things we like about our neighbourhood and the things we think could be changed to make it even better. It's about making sure adults listen and value us and include our dreams in their designs for our place'* (Malone, 2011). The design plans for the play space and pathway were presented to the developers as soon as the report had been completed. After three months, the developers introduced the draft design to the children, their parents and school staff at the school assembly.

The result is a completed 6,800 square metre park, which has been guided by the child-friendliness indicators and which incorporates the children's proposals. Stockland urban developers decided to create an on-going relationship between themselves and the children during the whole process of building. The children became development 'advisers', and the project received a whole school focus. A Stockland representative describes their newly established partnership with children:

'We loved working with the children and the school. The school has been 100% supportive and we look forward to working with them more as the development moves forward. Keeping in contact with the school involved getting some of the kids being part of the tree re-generation project up on the site, educating them on the construction point of view, showing them how a construction site works possibly so they can generate future employment ideas for themselves. It is about bringing them on the journey with us.'

Another significant output from of the project is a research report published by Karen Malone, showing in detail the results of the workshops and identifying the different aspects of a neighbourhood that children would want to live in. It emphasises the role of environmental education in empowering children to be capable of making a difference to their urban environment. Karen also notes the impact of the project on the developers:

'Through the Dapto Dreaming research, Stockland became committed to creating a truly child friendly city – where children have the freedom to independently play and explore their natural environments, and where adults listen to young people and take what they say seriously' (Karen Malone).

Resources

JMD design 'Emu Park, Brooks Reach Dapto wins NSW Chapter Planning Institute President's Award and the Planning for Children and Young People Award '
<http://www.jmddesign.com.au/category/projects/news/> . (accessed 13 December 2013).

Malone, K (2011) 'Designing and Dreaming a Child Friendly Neighbourhood for Brooks Reach, Dapto', University of Western Sydney, Bankstown, NSW, Australia. Online. Available.
http://www.stocklandcommunitiesnsw.com.au/pdfs/brooks_reach/health_CFDapto-report2011.pdf
(accessed 30 July 2013).

Malone, K (2012) 'The future lies in our hands: children as researchers and environmental change agents in designing a child-friendly neighbourhood', *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, 18:3, 372-395. Online. Available: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13549839.2012.719020> (accessed 9 December 2013).

Stockland – 'Brooks Reach, Horsley – Kids design their perfect park'
<http://www.stockland.com.au/residential/brooks-reach-school-kids-design-their-perfect-park.aspx> (accessed 9 December 2013).

University of Western Sydney. 'A dream result for Dapto Dreaming and the Brooks Reach development'
http://www.uws.edu.au/newscentre/news_centre/more_news_stories/a_dream_result_for_dapto_dreaming (accessed 30 July 2013).



Courtesy: Karen Malone



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