

OUT & ABOUT IN PENRITH

Universal Design and Cultural Context:
Accessibility, diversity and recreational space in Penrith

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

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Summary of Project

Universal Design principles aim to overcome the marginalization of people with diverse abilities by designing facilities and spaces *physically accessible* to all. But what can be done to ensure *cultural inclusiveness*? This research partnership between Penrith City Council and the University of Western Sydney investigated cultural barriers to public space use experienced by diverse residents of Penrith, and explored stakeholders' interests in design and planning for a range of users. The findings and recommendations aim to directly inform Council's open space planning, with the goal of enhancing community well-being by ensuring more residents and visitors enjoy these local facilities.

Key Research Findings

The findings are summarised as responses to the three original research questions.

1. **What is the knowledge base supporting the application of Universal Design as a local government strategic planning tool in the context of cultural diversity?**

Accessibility and inclusion —The term 'accessibility' is variably used but is mostly reduced to physical access. The literature on Universal Design (UD) additionally articulates goals to diminish stigmatisation or achieve social inclusion. UD has been applied in public open space and across a range of facilities and built environments. Its value to sustainable housing design is increasingly recognised.

Inclusion and 'non-exclusion' —UD supports social inclusion by reducing physical barriers, but non-exclusive open space requires lowering of cultural barriers.

User/Experts —The Council's Disability Access Committee is a model of using local knowledge of user/experts to identify accessibility issues and plan solutions.

Low level of knowledge —We found no apparent culture of design informing open space planning. Hardly anyone could identify design principles embodied in current spaces, and most equated UD with existing general notions of accessibility.

2. **What are the issues related to cultural complexity when planning and designing for accessibility to public and outdoor recreational open space within the Penrith LGA?**

Different public space norms —Complexities exist both within and between cultures. One issue for planning in culturally diverse contexts is that different cultures, sub-cultures, and generations have different assumptions and conventions about who uses public space, with whom, how, and when. Older women can feel intimidated by young people publicly socialising in large groups. Sudanese migrants like to make music, dance and cook in parks, but fear hostile looks and racist comments if they act outside current Australian norms of open space use

Anxiety and public open space —Anxieties about risk and safety in public space and nervousness about other cultural groups are cultural factors that influence park design, and lead many parents to disallow children's unsupervised park play.

Different cultures, shared interests —Designing open spaces for culturally diverse communities may not be too difficult as most express the same basic needs (toilets, shade, etc). Culturally specific designs can exacerbate territoriality, while designs for shared age, life stage and interests can foster cohesion.

Parks, nature and physical culture —Australian park designs emphasise 'nature' and physical exercise more than 'culture' and arts. Few gatekeepers have questioned the traditional priorities on sports facilities serving 10-18 year old males. The mainstream culture of outdoor sport and fitness is experienced as exclusive to people with disabilities, who are expected to give way to cyclists and joggers.

Parks as cultural and technological spaces —There are indicators that people increasingly want parks with more ‘cultural’ features, with amenities for comfort (especially toilets), and holding outdoor events like concerts, festivals, markets, etc... Some would like to play music through speakers. Many young people and adults would appreciate outdoor spaces that had WiFi connectivity.

Changing families —Changing family structures, work patterns and child care complexities mean that young children increasingly visit parks with non-custodial fathers and grandparents. Some children hardly ever visit parks, while many do not play organised club sport. These mean changing demands on park design and usage times. (e.g. wheelchair-accessible playgrounds; nocturnal access).

Exclusion of youth —A lack of play equipment usable by older children and teens, hostility from families with children in parks, harassment by security guards in the CBD, and the removal of facilities where youth congregate all give strong exclusionary messages to young Penrith residents seeking to occupy public space. Some youth also fear hostility from members of other youth subcultures.

‘Quiet knowledge’ —It is harder for many people to say what they like in parks than what they don’t like, and harder to name cultural barriers than physical ones. Creative consultation processes in open space planning allows expression of non-verbal aspects of local landscape experience (‘quiet knowledge’), and help identify subtle cultural barriers to access.

3. What are the *practical concerns* held by developers, major businesses, and PCC planners related to the application of Universal Design within the context of their understanding of the Penrith community?

Pragmatic approach —Gatekeepers were passionate about enhancing the quality of life and recreational opportunities for Penrith residents. But the prevailing approach to development of open space was largely pragmatic and driven by financial and budgetary considerations, including over funding sources (e.g. S94 levies) and related disparities in new versus older parks, costs of maintaining facilities, vandalism, and the expense of quality UD equipment. Lack of in-house knowledge of UD or working examples of it may also be barriers to adoption.

Vandalism —The costs of vandalism present a major disincentive to undertaking park improvements. The response to vandalism perpetrated by a minority of youth tends to be a punitive reduction of amenities for all. CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) solutions to vandalism are being pursued, but there did not appear to be any social inclusion programs addressing the problem.

Open space (under)use and UD —Funding and servicing constraints mean many open spaces are under-maintained or decommissioned. Compared to the benefits of having open space available and serviced, the opportunity costs of UD seem enormous. UD is thought of as an expensive retrofit serving a minority; few gatekeepers connect it with ideas of whole-of-lifespan use, or sustainability.

Regulatory questions —As social justice arguments for inclusive design are more morally than financially compelling, regulatory change for improved accessibility standards is one way to broaden UD applications. Experience with the regulatory approach shows it encourages conformity to minimum standards rather than the user-involved design processes and high aspirations of UD.

Future-oriented policy —Many gatekeepers regard UD as impractical at the moment, but Council’s strategic and policy commitments to it are based on a longer-term practical interest: how to plan for an ageing population with increasing numbers of mobile but variously impaired residents out and about in Penrith.