



The Built Environment

The design of our built environment affects us all – particularly children and young people. Designed well, the built environment enhances the development and wellbeing of children and young people, and supports healthier and happier communities. By engaging children and young people in the planning of our built environment, we can create places and spaces in our neighbourhoods that are engaging, fun, safe and accessible.

Why is the built environment important?

Schools, houses, shops, walkways, railways, parks, recreational and community centres are all part of our built environment. Researchⁱ tells us the design of neighbourhoods influences levels of walking, cycling and use of public transport, as well as affecting the sense of community. Our physical surroundings therefore shape how children and young people make active lifestyle choices, interact with their community and view the world.

The 'myWAspace' poll conducted by the Commissioner in 2010 found that half of the children and young people who responded do not have enough things to do or places to go in their neighbourhoods. This reflects what children and young people have told the Commissioner in almost every regional and rural community she has visited across the State.

Approximately 25 per cent of Western Australia's total population, and 44 per cent of the State's Aboriginal people, are under 18 years of ageⁱⁱ. And yet, children and young people are often not consulted by town planners, developers and other decision makers. The State's continuing population growth brings increased competition for resources and space, but also provides new opportunities to create more community-friendly buildings, spaces and infrastructure that meet the needs and reflect the ideas of children and young people.

"My idea of a better place for kids is one where they can feel invited, heard & safe" Caryn, age 17

What can be done to improve the built environment?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children and young people have a right to a clean and safe environment where they can play and rest, and that the government has a responsibility to create an environment where children and young people can grow and reach their potential. To meet this responsibility, it is vital to acknowledge children's right to influence decisions and express their opinion.

A number of local and international initiatives provide useful resources on how to create 'child friendly' built environments. The New Children's Hospital in Perth have actively engaged with children and young people to incorporate their views and ideas into the new hospital's design, including focus groups with nearly one hundred Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Internationally, UNICEF's *Child Friendly Cities* initiative provides a framework on how the Convention's principles can be implemented on built environment projects. The framework is applicable to a wide range of government systems - large and small, urban and rural.

"I would like to make a place that has no cars, where there's lots of trees to climb and gardens to explore!" Ruby, age 9

The built environment has the potential to enhance the health and wellbeing of children, young people and the wider community. Professionals who work in the built environment – planners, developers, designers, architects and service providers – can realise this potential, if they listen and respond effectively to the needs of children, young people and their families. The Commissioner's participation guidelines can help support organisations, including built environment professionals, to engage effectively with children and young peopleⁱⁱⁱ.

Consulting with children and young people during the design stages of a built environment project can help deliver tangible, better outcomes for all. Recent consultation conducted by the Commissioner with children and young people^{iv} highlights some of the concerns they have about their built environment, such as feeling unsafe and not having enough recreation facilities, as well as valuable ideas on how things might be improved.

In the Commissioner's online wellbeing survey, 42 per cent of children and young people said they often or sometimes felt scared in public places and this interfered with their ability to play outside. This was a particular issue for primary-school-aged children who reported feeling unsafe in public considerably more than young people.

The Commissioner's research and consultation suggests the following priority areas when designing spaces and buildings that will be used by children, young people and their families:

Designing for multi-use and accessibility – children and young people want to be part of the community, not segregated. Spaces should be designed to be flexible and multi-use to appeal to a broad range of community members.

Incorporating green spaces and recreation facilities – natural, open spaces support the development of children and young people through creative play. However, these spaces are disappearing and are often not factored into the design of new developments. Consultation with children also highlights the demand for more local schools, shops, libraries and swimming pools^v.

Designing safe places – in the National Survey of Young Australians 2009, nearly 25 per cent of young people in WA showed concern about their personal safety^{vi}. While crime levels may not have significantly risen, concerns for personal safety on public transport and in certain urban environments remains high among children, young people and their families.

Enabling active lifestyles – in 2007-08, one-quarter of all Australian children, or around 600,000 children aged 5 to 17 years, were overweight or obese, up four percentage points from 1995^{vii}. Research suggests that children and young people are spending more of their free time indoors and taking less active options in their every day lives.

Providing 'child friendly' transport options – car use in Perth ranks amongst the highest in the world; around 80 per cent of all personal trips are made by car^{viii}. Research shows that teenagers' access to job opportunities, social life, education, physical activity and independence were all found to be adversely affected by poor transport options^{ix}.

The 2008 Western Australian Child and Adolescent Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey found that only about half of primary school boys and girls actively commuted (e.g. walked or cycled) to school at least once in the preceding week.^x

There are opportunities for all of us to influence and improve our local environment, to make it more 'child-friendly'. Ways to encourage change may include getting involved in local initiatives, being aware of local development plans and valuing our existing 'child-friendly' spaces. And, if we can get the built environment right for our children and young people, we will create places that better serve the whole community.

The built environment has the ability to inspire everyone's imagination, and to enable social interactions with friends, family, the community and nature. The places and spaces that children and young people inhabit fundamentally influence their enjoyment of life and future development, so getting it right should be a priority for us all.

"The best place in the world is somewhere bright, colourful and has textures that are awesome to touch. It is easy to get to, safe and open to anyone. You can see how technology works and use it to talk to anyone. You can watch movies, listen to music and hang out inside and outdoors. You can run around, get hurt, chill out and eat yummy stuff." CCYP iBuild participants (aged 6 to 17), August 2010

For more information on this topic go to:

1. Unicef – BUILDING CHILD FRIENDLY CITIES – a framework for action <http://www.childfriendlycities.org/>
2. UNESCO – GROWING UP IN CITIES – a program to improve local environments <http://www.unesco.org/most/guic/guicmain.htm>
3. CCYP WA – PARTICIPATION GUIDELINES – a guide to involving children and young people <http://www.cryp.wa.gov.au/content/Participation%20Guidelines.aspx>
4. CCYP NSW – BUILT4KIDS – a good practice guide to creating child friendly environments http://kids.nsw.gov.au/uploads/documents/Built4Kids_complete.pdf
5. HEALTHY SPACES AND PLACES - a national guide for planning, designing and creating sustainable communities that encourage healthy living <http://www.healthyplaces.org.au/site/>
6. CABE – SPACESHAPER – a practical toolkit to measure the quality of a public space <http://www.cabe.org.uk/public-space/spaceshaper>
7. Play England – DESIGN FOR PLAY – a guide to creating successful play spaces http://www.playengland.org.uk/Page.asp?originx_2757hp_70994779705616h30y_2008630728a
8. Department of Planning WA – LIVEABLE NEIGHBOURHOODS – design elements of good neighbourhoods <http://www.planning.wa.gov.au/Plans+and+policies/Publications/1594.aspx>
9. COOL HUNTER - be inspired by design and architecture specifically for children and young people <http://www.thecoolhunter.com.au/kids>

ⁱ Billie Giles-Corti, Sally Kelty, Stephen Zubrick and Karen Villanueva, *How important is the Built Environment?*, Centre for the Built Environment and Health, School of Population Health, University of Western Australia and Centre for Developmental Health, Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2009.

ⁱⁱ March 2010 population trends, Australian Bureau of Statistics <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0>

ⁱⁱⁱ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, *CCYP WA – PARTICIPATION GUIDELINES*, <http://www.cryp.wa.gov.au/content>

^{iv} Nexus Strategic Solutions (with Sankey Associates and Professor Janet Fletcher, The University of Western Australia), *Speaking out about wellbeing - The views of Western Australian children and young people*, June 2010 and NSW Commission for Children and Young People, Ask the Children series, *Children and young people speak about the built environment*, 2008; and, work undertaken by the Beckenham Student Representative Council as a CCYP Advisory Committee (Years 5-9) <http://www.cryp.wa.gov.au/content.aspx?cid=312>

^v Nexus Strategic Solutions (with Sankey Associates and Professor Janet Fletcher, The University of Western Australia), *Speaking out about wellbeing - The views of Western Australian children and young people*, June 2010 and NSW Commission for Children and Young People, Ask the Children series, *Children and young people speak about the built environment*, 2008.

^{vi} Mission Australia, *National Survey of Young Australians 2009*, p. 121.

^{vii} *Australian Social Trends*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, September 2009.

^{viii} Department for Planning and Infrastructure, *The truth about travel in Perth*, Government of Western Australia.

^{ix} Phillippa Williams, Barbara Pocock and Ken Bridge, *Linked Up Lives: Putting Together Work, Home and Community in Ten Australian Suburbs*, Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia, 2009, p.27.

^x Physical Activity Taskforce, *Key Findings from the 2008 Western Australian Child and Adolescent Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey*, Government of Western Australia, 2009.