

Edited Transcript

Universal Design Conference

Sydney Town Hall (Lower)

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Day 1

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INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

Concurrent Session One: Chair Nicholas Loder

Geoff Barker: Inclusion a Necessity not an Option

Synopsis: This presentation highlights the importance of community engagement and involvement. Using a case study of a project in the Northern Territory with the local Aboriginal people he shows how careful planning, and involvement in all stages from initial concept to implementation is important for the success of a project.

When we started the project, we were given a very detailed brief and within that there was a lot of confusing objectives and often conflicting ones when we started pulling them apart, but I also want you to have a look at behind the words, which is the tent, which was typical of the circumstances that we found ourselves when we started doing our research and community engagement work, where we actually visited houses and spoke to people in their houses to find out what works and what doesn't work. As you can imagine in a dwelling where people have to live in a tent in the breezeway because there's no privacy anywhere else and the place is overcrowded, you can imagine that the showers, the toilets, the kitchens, the laundries are going to be in a situation where, as we have found in many cases, they are overused and not working, not because they're damaged, but because the hardware and the equipment just can't cope with the heavy use that they are experiencing.

Part of the reason for visiting all the houses within this particular case study was to find out what I said earlier about finding what works and what doesn't, but it was also a way of people getting to know that we actually can be trusted as an architect, and I like that idea that Guy put forward, that we will follow through on people's feedback, and it's amazing when you give people an opportunity to contribute to a process, even though they may not be directly benefiting from the outcomes of that, they're so willing to answer questions and give you information about what works and what doesn't because they're being listened to and hopefully somebody will benefit from that. That experience has been going on for over 30 years of the work that I've been doing in this space.

So talking to the users was an essential part of the process.

So here is the myth. One of the things we have to deal with is there were so many myths and one of those is that indigenous people don't respect their houses. As I described before, when a house is overcrowded or crowded to a high level, the hardware gets used to such an extent, and having talked to Clipsal and Caroma and various other manufacturers, you find out that in fact what hardware is designed for and Electrolux in terms of cooking and washing facilities, they're not designed for 24 people living in a house, they're designed for maybe 6 to 8 at the most.

So one of the things we found over more than 10 years now, nearly 15 years of working in this area and actually documenting what works and what doesn't is that 20% of the failure of hardware in particular was because it's poor choice of material, poor choice of the hardware, that it has been installed poorly and non-compliantly, as shown on the left. 70% is a fact of routine maintenance needing to be done, often not done. And 10% being damaged. That's not a value judgment on damage, that's just to say that it was damaged. Those figures were collected, or the figures were collected by tradesmen, and anybody who has

dealt with tradesmen - and most of us probably have in our own home - hold very strong views about things, so to get them to actually document that 70% of the failure of hardware was due to routine maintenance not being done was actually quite successful.

We're also dealing with poor water quality, and the photo on the bottom shows leaking taps in walls leaking on to the ground, again a leak that had been going for nearly three months unattended. So some of the key criteria from talking to people and expanding on the objectives that were contained in the brief, culturally appropriate and access and amenity were two of the highest-rated items or comments that came back from people.

So how do we get from poor maintenance and poor selection of equipment to something that is more appropriate and universally acceptable? The World Health Organization says that healthy cities - and I read "healthy homes and healthy communities - are all about involvement and this together with a belief that working with people can enable people to be in control of their living environment and make it their own and be motivated to maintain it and look after it.

So we do a lot of research before we actually ventured into the community, but it was an ongoing thing, and there were nine key areas that we started pulling apart: social, cultural, economic, environment, physical, management, political, aesthetic and historical. Our job was somehow to pull all this together and get the most acceptable, culturally acceptable, solutions within time frames, budgets and all the rest of it that were contained in the brief. As I said at the beginning, there were many conflicting objectives that may not seem conflicting in the first place, but they were.

So at the same time as we were doing this research, pulling the whole structure of the project apart, including identifying the demographics within the community, there was a very heavy engagement process started, and an important part of the engagement was gaining the trust of people to say "yes, we are going to deal with those top two priorities". So we said well, how do we do that, how do we gain trust? The main way of doing that is actually to have a presence in that community, negotiate a way for us to actually live in that community and do that research and do the engagement work as a member of that community. So we actually had a team of people who lived in the community building relationships, interacting. One of the key parts of that was respecting that when you are dealing with a client, a user, they have family responsibilities, they have obligations, they have kids that need to go to school, they have to do the cleaning and the washing up and all the other things that we all do. We don't go in there seeing a vacuum that we're going to fill and feel good about filling this vacuum with engagement and we're all going isn't it great. No, you need to live in that community and be part of it so that you can interact on a day-to-day basis in people's informal space as well as their formal space.

So we found that the disabilities that existed, the design issues that we confronted were not only about wheelchairs - and unfortunately a lot of the silo-type agency representatives said oh, well, just put ramps in. No, sorry, ramps are not enough. There are people over 50, and as many would know, the death rate is much higher - sorry, the number of people - let's put it another way. The population cohort is very much dictated by the young in an Aboriginal community at the moment. But there are also degenerative conditions like MJD, which is Machado Joseph Disease, a nerve degeneration disease which ends in death, which was highly prevalent on Groote Eylandt and people with young children in prams and pushers. There's people with sensory deprivation, sight, hearing and spatial issues, as well as the ambulatory restrictions.

So the engagement was very much about being with people and integrating people into the process, them designing the process to start with, how are we going to do this, how are we going to advance this? So people became involved as partners in this development, not as recipients, and that is a key part of the belief that we take into all our projects.

But the engagement doesn't just start at the beginning, it's an ongoing process and evaluating what you're doing as you go along is a key part of what we do. So let's talk about the particular example. So we started - if we were building 90 houses in a particular place, where are they going to go? Well, there's a shortage of land, so let's look at the subdivisions and the engagement process that was shown before, the top left-hand side is where people are telling us where we could and couldn't build based on local environmental issues, but cultural ones as well.

One of the core features of the subdivisions that did end up was privacy and security in terms of cultural appropriateness - remember that's one of the top priorities - was having space behind the houses so they don't back on to each other so people can't look into each other's yards, into each other's houses. So the subdivision - unfortunately, as with a lot of civil engineering companies, they tended to clear more trees than we were hoping, but anyway there has been a heavy replanting program happen since.

Within this subdivision design there was also lots that were - this one here, where there were three houses on the one lot. One of the key things people said was when you've got 24 people living in a house, we still want to live close together, but it's important that each part of that family have its own space to control and look after. One of the key things that came back was people saying "You white fellers, you always say that which like big houses because we want to live together, but that's not true, we do like living close together and we have obligations and so on, but each part of our family, they need to look after their own place".

So we designed small lots and larger lots to provide diversity of choice in the subdivision, and we were able to end up with a subdivision that delivered the same density as a conventional chessboard-type subdivision.

So on to the housing. The four critical things about the housing in particular in terms of those top two were security and privacy, solid buildings appropriate for cultural practices, universal access, and please can we have people getting trades and employment. So circulation space was an important part of that, so passageway widths, having desks in the bedrooms that can be accessed, a trench drain at the transition between a wet area and main living area so that if there is a spill, then there's no step to impede the water, but there's a trench drain to do that. Non-slip or high-slip resistant tiles.

Kitchens, especially the stove; bathrooms - in all the designs, all the three-bedroom designs and four-bedroom designs there were two full bathrooms, one fully compliant. Hardware chosen. You'll notice that in the middle there is no slide rows but because we're dealing with 90 houses and part of the ongoing engagement was about linking with occupational therapists and community people who had special needs, houses were modified before they were finished to cater for - or fitted out before they were finished to cater for special needs. So the 90 were built in a uniform way, all standard in terms of access and other aspects, but then were fitted out as needed to cater for special needs.

It didn't just finish with the houses, there was also landscape designs.

So the work that we've done we believe has not only generated a range of houses that deal with those top two priorities, but the level of engagement produced a high level of respect and recognition for the process, and people became advocates of the program and the work that we did and asked me to come back and do some more work.

This is just a quick film, or the beginning of a film, which I'm happy to release that we made about the process and this is just beginning. (Video played). The film goes into a lot more detail about the community engagement process and the designs that eventuated and there's also - I didn't speak from my paper directly, so there is a paper that goes with the visual presentation. So hopefully that can be made available.

NICHOLAS LODER: Are there any questions? My first question is end date, when did these projects finish and have you been back?

GEOFF BARKER: That's a very good question. We have actually asked for the opportunity to do a post-occupancy evaluation. There has been some post-occupancy work done in Alice Springs, which was one of our sites, and the feedback from that initially was there were some specific failures in terms of door hardware, fly screen doors, security doors, and some general queries. But when the second survey was done 12 months later, or not quite 12 months later, the major feedback was where's the maintenance? So that slide that I showed about the lack of maintenance, that became the biggest issue, not the houses, which was interesting.

SALLY JEAVONS: I'm interested in the outdoor spaces, interested to know what you found through the engagement.

GEOFF BARKER: Yes, one of the agency representatives said oh, well, you've got to have a barbecue in the yard and we've got to have an undercover area, an outside area, and we did provide what was called a carport/shelter that people could locate where they wanted, but when we talked to people about the barbecue, they said but where are you going to put it, I said where do you want it? He said no, maybe you could put three or four in our yard. Okay, three or four, right. I don't think we can afford that. Can you explain why? He said of course different seasons of the year and different times of the day people will have fires in different parts of their yard. A bash fire is not only used for cooking, it's used for other purposes as well, so where are you going to put that?

There are a whole lot of myths, not just that one about maintenance and the fitout of houses, there are a whole lot of myths like that that you have to deal with. Shade was another one, and that plan that was developed by a resident showed a lot of trees in the direction of the late afternoon sun for summer, so larger trees in the corner. Access to the street was an issue in terms of having level surfaces, but then the subdivision didn't have included in it footpaths, they were going to come later. In some cases that has happened, in some subdivisions we did, but in others it hasn't yet.

NICHOLAS LODER: I seem to see in the video that you had a lot of the local people doing the work. Was that part of the project as well?

GEOFF BARKER: Yes, very much so. One of the key objectives of the program was to achieve 20% local employment, and that's not just a number - say you have 100 people that sometime during the project you have 20 people involved. No, that's full-time effective employees 20%. In all the projects we achieved 20%. In some of them we achieved in excess of 30%. We're not talking about a project of a couple of months; we're talking about over 12 months. So to me that was a big - that was one of the requirements of local people, that we have people involved in the process, not just the engagement work to come up with designs and so on, but then through the delivery process to make sure that we were doing the right thing so meetings weren't just held at the beginning, there was a whole lot of sessions and interaction while the buildings were being built and we actually took people through the dwellings while they were being built to see if there was any feedback.

We had people from other communities who were just early in the process come and visit those houses as well so that people could use them as like a display home and get a feel for what was being proposed, and of course then people being involved in the construction and then the intention was that government would then have a structured way of delivering future projects so that employment and training could continue, but also that people could actually start doing the maintenance themselves, rather than relying on outside contractors all the time.

NICHOLAS LODER: I think we have one more question.

DELEGATE: I just wanted to ask, the process that you used in an Aboriginal community, does it translate into a city environment, is that sort of process possible in a city environment?

GEOFF BARKER: I would say yes because the overall framework is about you start with understanding the project, what is its context. Every project has that, and you need to do that research at the beginning before you embark on any work. I've been involved in some social housing programs and community housing programs that are part of the social housing sector and we've used that process exactly the same. Just working cross-culturally, you have language, terminology, expectations, and a whole range of other factors that you need to be aware of and be prepared to deal with as you work through. Like there were some Sudanese people in Perth that were part of a process and, yes, their expectations were totally different to some other members of that community who were also getting houses.

So, yes, the framework is the same and from an anti-discrimination point of view, I believe that that process and that framework is consistent across all the work we do, whether it's in schools, housing, planning - it's the same.

NICHOLAS LODER: Thank you very much, Geoff. It sounds like it's a bit like slow food, you don't want to have fast food or a fast approach or a solution, because it will come unstuck very quickly.

GEOFF BARKER: Can I just add that that's a good point, a lot of the criticism of what we do is oh, it will take longer, and I say "Well, hold on a minute, are you prepared - your risk management plan or your risk and opportunity matrix has in it protests during the project. Hold on, why don't we take that one out and take that risk factor out and make that an opportunity to maximise community involvement and user involvement and let's see the benefits that come from that?" Just very quickly, sorry, independently from the work we were doing, there was some research being done in two of the communities in which we worked by James Cook University and they were doing a tobacco study and the leader of that program rang

me up once in 2012 and said "Oh, Geoff, I want to talk to you about the work you've done" oh, yeah, okay. You'd be surprised but a high percentage of the people who moved into the new houses have decided they don't want people to smoke in their houses. I said "Wow". She said yeah, we're blown away, we could not believe such a major spinoff benefit came from that project. So that's why I want to go back and find out a bit more.

NICHOLAS LODER: Thank you very much.