

Edited Transcript

Universal Design Conference

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Day 1

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HOUSE AND HOME

Session Chair: Prof Bruce Judd

Noelle Hudson: Local government - friend or foe in the quest for Universal Housing Design?

Synopsis: Noelle outlines here research at local government level in Queensland to find out the level of support for introducing universal design in housing. There were some surprising results with some councils being supportive, but changing their minds later on, and others that were against it. Noelle provides some insights into some of the local government thinking in Queensland.

Now, I realise when we titled our report that we were being a bit provocative when we said "Friend or foe in the quest for universal housing design". I didn't realise how provocative it was until I scanned the participants list today and I counted how many local government people were here. So I would like to preface this by saying very clearly Queensland local government and I would also like to further preface this by saying none of them are here, so we know where we're going, right?

Just in case people don't know who Queensland Action for Universal Housing Design is, we're affiliated with the Australian National Dialogue on Universal Housing Design and it's a group of organisations and passionate individuals who are calling for regulation for minimum access requirements in the Building Code of Australia for all new and extensively modified housing. Now, with that in mind, the other thing I noticed in our opening address by Dr Gerald Craddock, was he used the word quest as well. I thought we seem to be on a quest for universal housing design. When I looked at the definition of quest, it was a long or arduous search for something important. So we're all on this road, we're all looking, and in that sort of series I know I have a lot of friends in the audience, apart from maybe the local government people, but stick with me.

I don't need to explain why we're asking for universal housing design. What we might need to explain is why are we involving local government? Now, local government is obviously where the rubber hits the road with a lot of planning. It's where people apply for their houses. It's where you get your development approvals. It's where people have their access codes. These are the people that you see every day. These are your street-level bureaucrats, the people who take the laws from federal and state and have to make them work for you. They're the people who see their residents.

So upon our sort of search to get universal housing design and to change, we thought "Actually, local government is a good way to start". We were very lucky in Queensland, that the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Graham Quirk, has a child with a disability, so he has this life experience and knows what it's like to be a parent of a child with a disability and I think that has deeply impacted him and his appreciation for how important it is.

When we asked the Brisbane City Council about this stance, we got this extremely supportive letter. Now, in this letter Lord Mayor Quirk stated wonderful words of support of saying that they supported us, they think it's very important, and there is a lack of safe and accessible housing in Queensland and in the Council and they support the organisation's position for regulation of access requirements. We thought yahoo, we're home. But then he qualified that, because he is a politician, and he said "However, it is not within our jurisdiction, but we see ourselves to be able to lobby State and Federal Governments."

So armed with this wonderful letter of support by someone who is very influential, in case people - I know the majority of people here are from New South Wales and Victoria - Brisbane is very unique. It's one very large council. So the greater Brisbane area has five councils and has about 70% of Queensland's population, but Brisbane itself is an extremely large council. So it's not negotiating with small little councils, it's one large council. So having this tucked in our belt, we went forth on our quest and we surveyed all of the councils, which was 73 councils in 2011. That was post an amalgamation process that was not well received. It was sort of enforced upon councils. So this is explaining the environment that went from 157 councils down to 73 through a State-run process by the previous Government.

Anyway, we asked all of the councils "How do you feel, do you support Lord Mayor Quirk's stance?" So from this we got this. Now, out of those 73 councils, 19 responded and that was despite a follow-up. Instead of just throwing it in the sand, what we realised was out of those 19 councils we had I think it was about 83% of Queensland's population represented in those 19. That's the sum total of their population compared to the total. We thought while the response rate is quite low, the actual representation is very large.

Then we realised that 77% of Queenslanders lived in a council that supported the provision of universal housing design and that the ones that did not support it were actually - there was only one metropolitan in there and the other ones were quite small. Interestingly, at that point in time the LGAQ, which is the Local Government Association of Queensland, the representative body, had sent us a letter saying that they did not support universal housing design and neither did all of their members, but of course this was not the case. We have not included their results within this because they're not an actual LGA.

So from there, since 2012, there have been a lot of changes. As I alluded before, there was a lot of unrest. People were not happy about this forced amalgamation. In fact, we had four councils who were extremely unhappy, but as a result of the changes to State Government, the last time you see those smiling and shaking hands together, one of their election promises was to hold referendums on whether or not councils would de-amalgamate at their own cost - there was a rider. Four of those councils decided that they would. That was Noosa, Douglas, Livingstone and Mareeba.

We've also had during this time the National Disability Insurance Scheme come out, Livable Housing Design Guidelines have been adopted with varying levels of take-up, and we've had this strong push to have people age in place. As we saw by my colleague, people want to age in place. So considering all of these changes, the environment had changed greatly. So we thought it was timely to repeat our survey. After all, we've had State change, but we've had big federal policy initiatives, including millions of dollars following it. How would this impress us? How would this change? Would we in fact have more supporters?

No. Basically we did not, unfortunately. So we followed the same process and this time it was quite targeted, we did it at the beginning of this year. We followed the same process, used the same letter, and really tried to do the same. We had a similar response rate. In fact, to the number - 19 councils got back to us. So when you look at it, it was actually slightly lower, but when we looked at the findings, it was a little bit unusual in the respect that suddenly we didn't have you're with us or you're against us, we had support, not support, non-committal and non-engagement. I had to include this not support, non-committal and non-engagement because there was a little bit of weasel words in some of these answers, we can either say yes, we can either say no, it's like yes we agree this is really supportive and we wish you well in your efforts,

but there was no position. There was no actual definable this is where we stand within their response.

Then, interestingly, we had a few councils who actually said "Well, we're not engaging, we can't", and understandably one of those was the new council of Noosa, who said "I'm sorry, we just cannot do this at the moment, we're in the process of setting up a whole new council". But the interesting part about this was the reasons that people stated that they would and wouldn't support housing, universal housing design.

Now, the supporters drew upon the fact that they had a change in demographics within their regions, they were trying to plan for the future, they were aware that the community was diverse, that they had people with disability, people who are ageing, and they wanted to create cohesive communities, and in fact one council said that they wanted contemporary legislation that was for now and for the future. I thought fantastic. But the ones that didn't support the changes, they were based - now, the supporting councils were actually based across Queensland. The non-supporting councils, they were all in northern Queensland. I don't know what happens up there, but one was a large one, then we had two smaller councils. Everyone has a valid reason for their positions. But we noticed that their reasons were more based on it would prohibit investment in the region, developers wouldn't like it, our current stock is two-storey and, no, we just can't go there. With the support, we did have people say yes, we do support this and there was one council that had a caveat that said "However, not for dwellings above two levels". So they were sort of trying to have a foot in both camps. We could understand it, and as people here know, we have a bedroom and bathroom and everything on the bottom level and you can do it from the garage, that could work.

But the non-committal in the process, as I said, it showed that the political will was there and in fact in the non-committal we noticed that one of the previous councils that were a big supporter had a change of mayor in that election and now wouldn't even engage in the process. They did engage to tell us that they weren't engaging, so at least it wasn't one of the ones that didn't even respond, and one of the other ones that was non-committal was new to the process, but we did notice that the change of mayor tended to change where people were. And we did notice that some of our large supporters earlier in the process had now not responded back, that there had been a change in their government and they hadn't responded back, or some who had been big supporters were now reluctant to put their colours on the wall.

So overall how did this look for us? Suddenly we have a very different graph. We went from a graph where we had 77% of all Queenslanders living in a council that was supportive of this to now we had 54% of Queenslanders who were supportive. We only have 4% of people living in councils that were right against it, 4% who are non-committal and four who stated they weren't part of it, but now we have 34% who were living and not responding. So that changed the overall.

So when we look at our comparison of them, this is where it gets interesting. So while we have a similar response rate, not all of the LGAs from 2012 engaged with this process. As I said, there are a couple of the very large councils that in particular Redland City Council had a change of mayor and didn't engage. In fact, they sent us back saying that they would need more information and us to do a full process, have to do a full for them to consider it and within their briefing papers put developers might not like it.

Gold Coast Council had had a change of mayor and did not participate in the process, but weren't a stated non-engagement. Those two councils alone are very large populations in Queensland. Logan City Council

did not have a change of mayor. However, despite numerous follow-ups and engagement, et cetera, did not provide us a position. So we saw a change over time. So, as I said, the number of Queenslanders living in an LGA has dropped.

However, what does this mean for us? Are local government foes. Not really. I don't think they are. I think we have some local governments that are definitely against it and it was interesting to see that the non-supportive local governments aligned their reasons to more neo-liberal reasoning - investment, existing stock, but they didn't align them to who was living there, they didn't align them with ongoing future residents or what the community needed or wanted or how it was growing. It was all about, no, this is a barrier. We did have a lot of councillors saying to us, "It's not our jurisdiction, it's not our area, we have so much happening at the moment, we're developing new rules, we've got a new State Government legislation coming in, we've got this coming in, we've got this coming in, we've got this coming in, it's way down the bottom, we just can't get to it, it's not within our ambit, this is not what we do". But never once in that conversation did they say, "But the people living in our community need it", never did they say we understood, but we did notice that the bureaucrats that we spoke to, the people who were our go-betweens, were very supportive but unfortunately their name can't go on the letter.

So where does this mean for us in our ever-going quest? Well, it means that we know where we are, so we know that to elicit change we probably shouldn't focus on local government, that we have strong allies in local government, we also have some people who are resistant to change and there is work to happen there. But probably these decisions - it's a really good understanding for us that decisions are influenced by the politics and they are influenced by people who at the top can set the whole tone that even big supporters can change on a whim with an election. Although it has not influenced the overall position, we know where we are, we do know the landscape. Now we go forth on our quest. Thank you.

PROF. BRUCE JUDD: Thank you, Noelle.

DELEGATE: Abby Bloom, NSW Ministerial Advisory Committee on Ageing. Thank you very much. That really was fascinating and it was quite sobering to see how sentiment can shift so quickly. I just wanted to ask you about your experience and maybe we could even hear from one more local government representative in the audience. With the very, very tight housing market in places like Sydney, the strong desire we heard earlier of people to remain in their own homes and, third, the presentation suggesting that retrofitting for universal design or even access can damage the amenity of a home so while the person might have a laundry somewhere convenient or a lift, we heard that other aspects of their housing amenity could be prejudiced. So local councils have to approve a lot of the retrofitting, and I know this is for me a very personal thing, my next door neighbour will not move from her own home, she can't get up and down the stairs for various reasons. She's living a Julian Assange like life but in a northern suburbs community. Councils are very concerned, for instance, about projection on to the street or setback or things that are almost ironclad constraints. At what point will councils try to integrate the need for adaptability in housing into the housing approval process?

NOELLE HUDSON: Well, I know in Queensland that the State Planning Act dictates what the local councils can actually do, so therefore that is first and foremost and in fact every local council in Queensland has had to make sure that their local area acts are within the very strong guidelines of the State Planning Act, and the Building Codes of Australia and building codes in Queensland are a State Act as well, so while we participated in that, and I know Queensland Shelter did when I was a part of it, and even the Brisbane City

Council City Plan, they had extensive consultations and a lot of people saying "we want universal principles in there, we want housing to reflect you've got public buildings that offer this, you've got very great public access, but once you get in the door you're lucky if you can get in the door of personal dwellings, let alone visit them, and they put it in, and I actually know the managers of these areas - they put it into the city plan and it was actually struck out by the State, because they said "You cannot include something that is above what you're allowed to do."

Now, I can understand them doing it if it was less than what the State said, but the fact that they wanted to allow that to be above and beyond and they really were committed, so these are really great offices, but it was struck out at that level. So I really think it is that it just keeps getting clearer and clearer to us that a big decision has to be made at that higher level and it's very sad to say that we are not making that impact there.

DELEGATE: I'm from Sport and Recreation Victoria and I must confess I also was a former local government officer at some stage of my life. It was a very good presentation and I guess to me the way I see it, local government is one part of the element of creating change and in projects that I've been involved in and looking at sustainability reminds me very much of universal design and trying to get acceptance or changing policy to get better sustainable or universal design outcomes.

One of the key elements that we've found in various projects I've worked in is working with industry, working with developers, who understand about cost and understand, if you think about universal design right upfront, it doesn't cost much more and it also gives you so much more marketable options. So have you considered working with your local developers to be your champions to then work with councils and engage with council in another way and showing them that it's not that hard?

NOELLE HUDSON: My colleague Marg will be speaking to her PhD work tomorrow in the building industry and their acceptance and place in this, but we have been doing that work as well and we did have a small boutique builder guy who did it and basically the costs I think, were minimal. We are hoping to see that, but there is great resistance from the building industry, although there are some very large building organisations that are getting involved, but, yes, that would be a wonderful way to go forward and we are pursuing that, but it's a bit of a hard road at the moment.

DELEGATE: I was lucky enough to attend the universal design conference in Sweden a couple of months ago and I think really one of the key messages from people like Patricia Moore and Ed Steinfeld while we continue to use words and terminology such as universal design, inclusive design, accessibility, we continue to marginalise discourse and we continue to put the needs of a whole range of people regardless of ability in that category of "other". So I think Patricia Moore's message very clearly was talk about good design, exemplary design, design that's usable by all, and I think we become more mainstream for the conversations of discourse isn't marginalising and putting under that other category. While it's still put in the other category, we'll always continue to have difficulties in getting mainstream acceptance at the policy at a higher level. Just a shared comment and thought.

NOELLE HUDSON: And we certainly have been discussing about the discourse and I would like to agree with Ger Craddock, that that beautiful building, the Guggenheim, it's exemplary design and I'd also like to point out we don't have a Guggenheim in Queensland and maybe we should aim for that. Maybe that's a better way to pitch ourselves, to really aim for that world-level design excellence, rather than just

saying - because people are now saying is that code for disability, and coming from the affordable housing area, people say oh, affordable, is that code for social housing, is that code for housing commission. So it's that power of words, I fully agree.

DELEGATE: Tomorrow we have a presentation by Banyule City Council, which is also from Victoria. I've had a look at what Victoria has been doing recently and they talk universal design down there and what the city council has managed to do - I won't pre-empt their talk, but basically you have to get talking together, with the developers and so on, but before you do that you have to have an overarching willingness, political willingness, to allow that talk to happen and I think this is where the Victorian State Government maybe have one over us at the moment because they don't have this mantra of a development-led economic recovery that we keep talking about here in New South Wales, and that gives it a lot more power to developers, it's easy to just say no.

NOELLE HUDSON: I agree with you. We have a modification of housing rather than a community focus. It's really a commodity traders market and that lack of focus on the residents now and in the future.

DELEGATE: I'm from Local Government New South Wales. I think there are, like in Queensland, a number of restrictions on councils in terms of what they can allow in terms of housing, which are imposed at the state level. But I think the important thing is also to consider the other part of the puzzle, which is informing consumers about what to look for in housing and to demand that in housing and there is probably a need for some advice or some sort of centre where those that sort of can be provided to people so they make those choices and demand it for the dwellings they buy.

PROF. BRUCE JUDD: Thanks, Noelle, for your contribution this afternoon.