Social sustainability: creating places and participatory processes that perform well for people

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Figure 1. Active engagement in one of the 5000+ forum discussions. (image: Integrated Design Commission)

ABSTRACT

Social sustainability is about ensuring the sustenance of the diverse social relations that exist in healthy communities. Creating the physical, cultural and social places that support wellbeing and a sense of community involves a process of engagement with the people who inhabit those places.

There are several key points to note: social sustainability is as much about the process as it is about the outcome, the design of the physical place is critical and the physical outcomes need to be integrated with social infrastructure systems.

The note is divided into two parts. Part A provides a background to social sustainability, connects the concept to the Australian context and highlights the integrated approach required for successful outcomes. Part B focuses on design principles and provides practical strategies for architects pursuing socially sustainable outcomes.

Introduction

The way we build and organise our cities can help or hinder social connection.

– JF Kelly et al, *Social Cities*, Grattan Institute p. 3

This 'way' of building cities refers not only to the formal structure of the city but the manner or systems through which we arrive at that structure.

– Angelique Edmonds, *Architecture Australia*, Jan 2013

This paper is about the role design can play in working towards socially sustainable outcomes. Social sustainability is about ensuring the sustenance of the diverse social relations that exist in healthy communities. Within the built environment, this means creating the physical, cultural and social places that support people's wellbeing and encourage a sense of community. Achieving and maintaining its longevity involves a process of engagement with the people who inhabit those places.

While regional and urban development policy plays a critical role in the extent to which Australians can achieve social sustainability, there is no single policy lever or responsible authority that single-handedly delivers social sustainability; rather an integrated approach engaging the public is required.

As figures who are fundamentally important to the process of urban development, architects are wellplaced to participate and contribute to this process; architects can impact the population's capacity to achieve social sustainability through design led public engagement, an important contributor to people's sense of connection to their community.

PART A – Background

What is social sustainability?

Social Life, a social innovation leader in the UK, defines social sustainability as '[a] process for creating sustainable, successful places that promote wellbeing, by understanding what people need from the places [where] they live and work. Social sustainability combines the design of the physical realm with design of the social world – infrastructure to support social and cultural life, social amenities, systems for citizen engagement and space for people and places to evolve' (Woodcraft et al, 2011 p. 16).

This definition highlights several key points: social sustainability is as much about the process as it is about the outcome, the design of the physical place is critical and the physical outcomes need to be integrated with social infrastructure systems.

The concept of a triple bottom line approach (economic, environmental and social) to sustainability has been around for almost two decades. While there has been significant work in defining economic and environmental sustainability, it has been more challenging to define and quantify social sustainability. Social sustainability outcomes cannot be measured in the same way that many environmental outcomes can. Establishing criteria for success is challenging due to the complexity of the issue and a lack of consensus by theorists in the field. In many instances, indicators of social sustainability are context dependant and need to reflect the nature and requirements of the local community (McKenzie 2004 p. 5). Social sustainability brings together a number of different ideas about social equity, social needs and the sustainability of communities, often described in terms of social capital, social cohesion and wellbeing (Bacon, Cochrane & Woodcraft 2013, pp. 15 & 71 reference iv).

Wellbeing is influenced by 'a complex combination of a person's physical, mental, emotional and social health factors' (Better Health Channel). Wellbeing is increasingly recognised by various organisations, including government and community groups, as being of key relevance to people's lives. It has become a vital consideration for improving local area policy and service delivery decisions.

Evidence demonstrates 'there is a strong connection between the quality of social infrastructure in new communities and the wellbeing of new residents' (Department of Planning, Oxford Brookes University 2006, p. 26). Being socially and culturally connected is so important for health and wellbeing that, 'for many people, improved relationships are a much more realistic path to a better life than increased income' (Kelly et al 2012, p 5). 'Humans are social animals [and] relationships are critical to our wellbeing. A lack of social connection leads to loneliness and isolation, experiences far more harmful than previously realised' (Kelly et al 2012, p. 3).

'The way we build and organise our living environments can help or hinder social connection. At worst, failed approaches can 'build in' isolation, with long-term damage to quality of life and physical and mental health' (Kelly et al 2012, p 4). 'A lack of social infrastructure to support new residents slows the process of building a community and can create long-term problems for its wellbeing' (Department of Planning, Oxford Brookes University 2006, p 26). Support that at the outset can seem relatively insignificant can have far-reaching consequences; for example, the provision of footpaths and availability of direct bus routes to connect people to local facilities and jobs. Factors that shape how inclusive and safe residents feel about their community also include the

recognition of cultural community values and respect of cultural heritage. Design decisions that recognise the importance of supporting the development of this soft infrastructure are critical to creating socially sustainable outcomes.

Practical and operational aspects of social sustainability are not well explored, clearly defined or well integrated in the policy and practice of urban planning and housing' (Bacon, Cochrane & Woodcraft 2013). The inclusion of meaningful social sustainability targets and methodologies in sustainability indicators is overdue, particularly for urban development.

Social sustainability and the built form

As discussed above, social sustainability has been 'largely neglected in mainstream sustainability debates. Priority has been given to economic and environmental sustainability, in particular in the context of planning, housing and communities, where policy and investment has focused on renewable resources, low carbon communities and encouraging pro-environmental behaviour in households' (Woodcraft et al 2011, p. 15). While some sustainability rating tools[1] have begun to capture aspects of social sustainability within urban scale developments, the framework, metrics and indicators are still in the early stages of development and have yet to cover the breadth and focus to fully address social sustainability.

As a result of this lack of focus, social sustainability is considered as an emerging field in the built environment and 'there are few practical resources that directly address the question of how to create places that are socially sustainable' and little physical infrastructure that is both environmentally sustainable and culturally inclusive (Woodcraft et al 2011, p. 15).

Recent practical resources that will assist in changing this include two reports and an emerging measurement framework by UK-based organisations and two programs from Australia.

In the UK, the Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development (OISD) conducted some research in 2009 and produced a report entitled *Measuring Socially Sustainable Urban Regeneration in Europe*. As part of this project, the authors developed a framework and a 'set of social sustainability indicators for measuring the social dimensions of urban regeneration' (Colantonio & Dixon 2009, p. 17). These indicators include:

- how connected residents feel to each other, or the sense of place in the community
- provision of and access to services
- green design features
- proximity to business and employment
- cultural activities
- community involvement.

The aim of the work was to provide measureable indicators of success to assist in the argument for building socially sustainable communities.

Going a step further, a 2011 report, *Design for Social Sustainability – a framework for creating thriving new communities* has established just that: a framework for designing, building and creating successful communities. Completed in 2011 by the Young Foundation, it was commissioned by the Homes & Communities Agency, the national public body that funds new affordable housing and land regeneration in England. This research study identified the four key elements that are 'essential to build new communities that will be successful and sustainable in the long term' (Woodcraft et al 2011, p. 21).

These four elements are:

1. **Amenities and social structure**

   Establishing social infrastructure is a key strategy to support new communities. It includes both physical infrastructure – such as public transport, schools and shops – and social infrastructure such as support from community workers and the community activities that begin to establish a 'sense of shared history' (Woodcraft et al 2011, p. 25).

2. **Social and cultural life**

   This refers to social capital, being 'the quality of relationships between residents that give a community the capability to be supportive and empowered, and a rich cultural life' (Woodcraft et al 2011, p. 32).

3. **Voice and influence**

   This element suggests that engaging residents in the process of designing a new community is critical in terms of empowering the community. The report argues that empowerment can contribute to wellbeing in three ways (Woodcraft et al 2011, p. 39):

- Creating opportunities for residents to influence decisions
- Facilitates contact between neighbours
- Builds residents' confidence to control local circumstances.

1 Such sustainability rating or assessment tools at the time of publication include, but may not be limited to: Green Star Communities, LEED Neighborhood Development, the Living Building Challenge and One Planet Living/Communities framework.

4. Space to grow

This element is about adaptable planning and design (Woodcraft et al 2011, p. 43).

The paper identifies strategies for implementing each of the four elements in the design of new communities to assist those communities to become socially sustainable. The 'strategies' or 'building blocks' are grouped under three common headings:
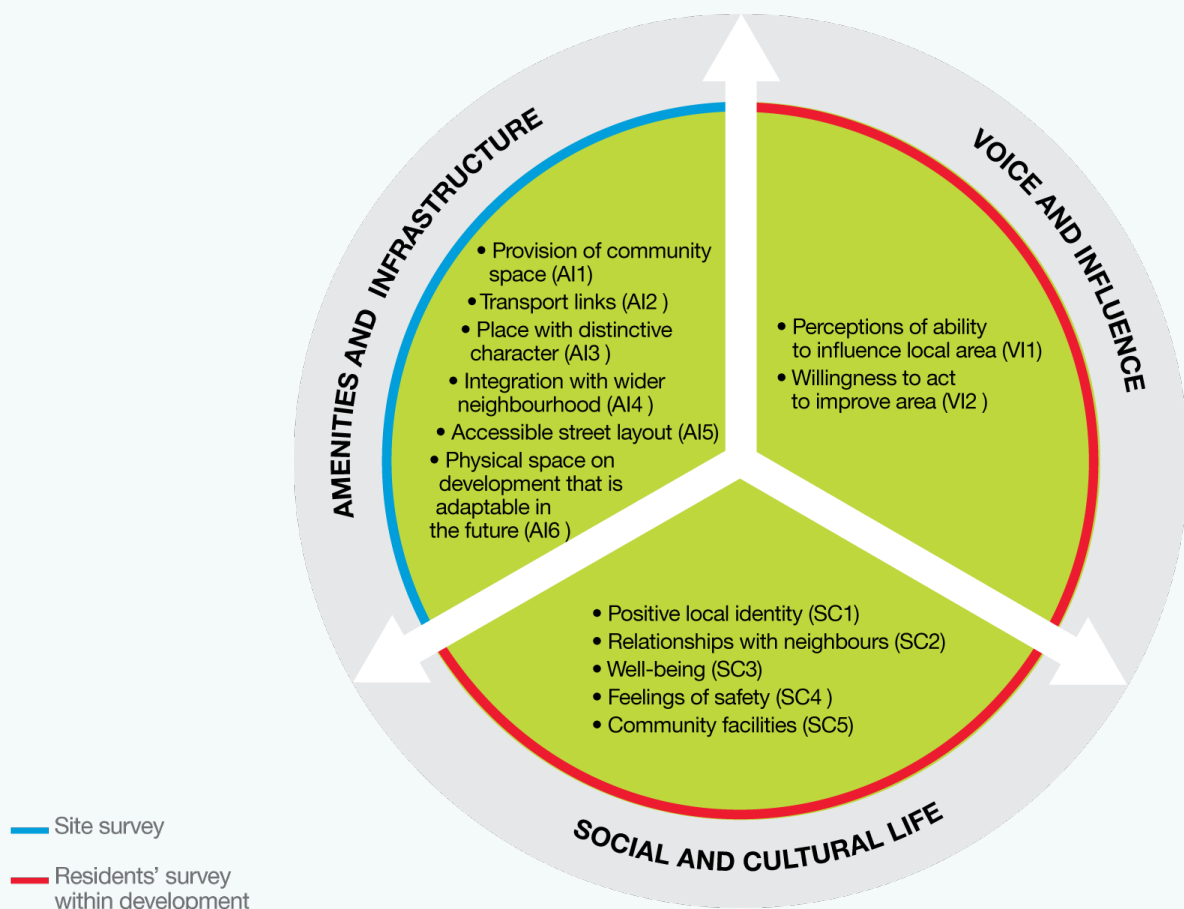
- Built environment and public space
- Social architecture and supports
- Social practices

The strategies listed within 'Built environment and public space' are of most relevance to architects and are discussed in Part B.

In 2012 the authors at the Young Foundation of the 2011 report referred to above (*Design for Social Sustainability – a framework for creating thriving new communities*) established a new social enterprise called Social Life and published a further resource in 2013 called

Creating Stronger Communities: How to Measure the Social Sustainability of New Housing Developments. It describes the development of a framework to measure the social sustainability of new housing and mixed-use developments. The framework was developed in collaboration with the Berkeley Group, a significant housebuilding company (that was awarded UK Housebuilder of the Year in 2010 and 2011), and tested on four Berkeley developments built over the last 10 years.

The framework consists of three dimensions consistent with those outlined in the 2011 report (described above): 'infrastructure and social amenities', 'voice and influence' and 'social and cultural life'. In the 2013 framework, 13 indicators underpin the measurement of those dimensions. Data from 45 questions in total created the results for each indicator. Primary data was collected through a face-to-face residents' survey and a site survey.

AMENITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

- Provision of community space (AI1)
- Transport links (AI2)
- Place with distinctive character (AI3)
- Integration with wider neighbourhood (AI4)
- Accessible street layout (AI5)
- Physical space on development that is adaptable in the future (AI6)

VOICE AND INFLUENCE

- Perceptions of ability to influence local area (VI1)
- Willingness to act to improve area (VI2)

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

- Positive local identity (SC1)
- Relationships with neighbours (SC2)
- Well-being (SC3)
- Feelings of safety (SC4)
- Community facilities (SC5)

— Site survey

— Residents' survey within development

Figure 2. The 13 indicators for measuring social sustainability organised within three dimensions. (Source: Social Life/Berkeley Group 2013.)

Australia is also working in this area. In 2010, the South Australian government initiated a process of engaging with people to prepare a 30 year plan for Greater Adelaide. They established, as part of this process, some guiding principles for engaging people in place design (*5000+ Engagement Feedback Report* 2012, pp. 221 & 227). These principles identify some key points:

- Citizens have a right to be engaged, and to be provided with meaningful information at an early stage that 'acknowledges local experience and skill'.

- An authentic engagement process, that is inclusive and transparent, will deliver better outcomes.

- Not all communities are the same – an engagement process needs to be tailored to the people who are involved.

- Community engagement needs to be well coordinated and resourced, and importantly have a clear purpose – too often communities can feel 'over consulted' without perceiving any outcomes arising from the process.

Evidence from this project suggests that engaging people in this way leads to an increase in community participation and knowledge. The 5000+ project, another recent South Australian example, builds on this experience and takes community engagement in place-making to a new level.

'5000+ an Integrated Design Strategy for Inner Adelaide', is a design led project which involved bringing together a multidisciplinary team to lead the redesign and renewal of inner Adelaide. Design ideas and propositions were sought from a broad range of stakeholders and tested. The project was a national pilot supported by significant investment from federal, state and local governments showcasing how a design led collaborative process between government, design professionals and community can result in good design outcomes for a city (*5000+ Engagement Feedback Report* 2012, pp. 222-223).

Decision making and planning are being transformed through greater levels of public participation, such as the 5000+ project. These 'emerging conversations in Australia about our aspirations as a community, demonstrate that our goals and values can't be determined unilaterally, but are the result of many voices, reflecting multiple experiences' (*5000+ Engagement Feedback Report* 2012, p. 233).

The built environment design process can act as a method to engage with the public about future options for their community and the relative merits of the options. Design processes can offer a critical

contribution to social sustainability by acting as a connecting voice, a social and cultural conduit and a catalyst for working in, with and for community and government, to interpret and translate community aspirations into a vision and a declaration of cultural values.
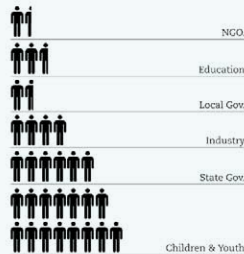
Design processes can offer a critical contribution to social sustainability by acting as a connecting voice, a social and cultural conduit

An example of this approach is demonstrated in summary form in the following poster, which captures the work of three pilot projects and weeks of conversations (including two full day forums) amongst more than 300 participants. The aim of the project was to collaboratively address the desire to create child and youth friendly cities. Sixty primary school children joined more than 200 teachers, health care professionals, planners, architects, and social services professionals, and worked alongside the SA Minister for Children, Council for the Care of Children, chief executives of the SA Department for Education and Child Development, Renewal SA (state land development agency) and members of local government. The discussion centred on issues related to making communities more child friendly and providing opportunity for children to participate meaningfully in the decisions which affect their life and environments.

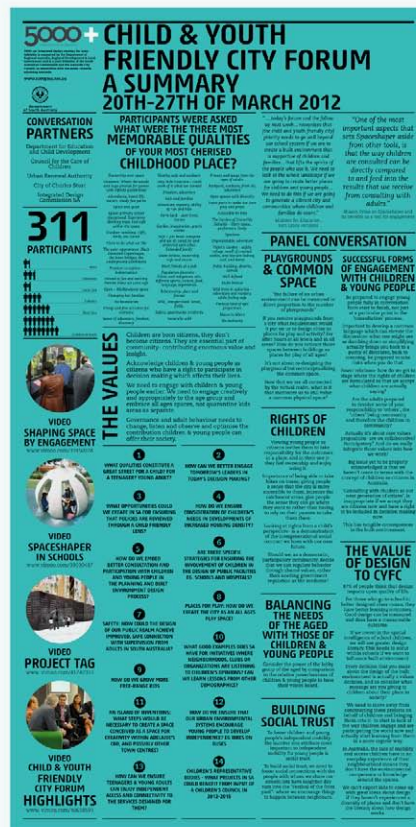Figure 3. Summary poster of 5000+ Child & Youth Friendly City (CYFC) Forum, with excerpt highlights. More on CYFC including the full size poster may be found at: http://5000plus.net.au/forums/child_and_youth_friendly_cities_forum (source: Integrated Design Commission)

Who is involved in creating social sustainability – An integrated approach

Social sustainability cannot be delivered by one authority or profession alone. It requires an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach with a range of policy supports to both determine the desired outcomes and then commit to their implementation.

The integrative approach refers not only to the inter-relationship between the designed outcome and the social infrastructure, but also the relationship between the process and the community networks that follow.

There is no single policy lever, or responsible authority, which single-handedly delivers social sustainability. Government, community, policy makers across a wide range of disciplines, and designers all have a role to play to engender social sustainability.

The architect's role in delivering social sustainability is explored in Part B. What follows is a brief summary of how Australian governments and communities are participating in the creation of social sustainability.

Federal government

The Australian government is well placed to lead a national approach to social sustainability. A key role is to facilitate a focus on the issue across a range of government policies such as population targets, social inclusion, heritage and cultural policy. More specifically, the federal government can establish important strategic planning principles with appropriate support for state and local government delivery.

Efforts already underway in this area, such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Capital City Strategic Planning Criteria, the National Urban Policy and national Urban Design Protocol, which are models that can be replicated and built upon in relation to social sustainability.

The National Urban Policy and National Urban Design Protocol's measures relating to social sustainability and wellbeing include liveability, connectivity, community wellbeing and improved planning and management of our cities.

The 'social role' of development is clearly defined by the federal government in the framework of *Our Cities, Our Future: Australia's National Urban Policy for a productive and sustainable future* (Department of Infrastructure and Transport 2011), as an objective to 'enhance the liveability of our cities by promoting better urban design, planning and affordable access to recreational, cultural and community facilities'. This is further emphasised under the 11th priority to 'support community wellbeing'.

In addition, the 12 principles underpinning *Creating Places for People: an Urban Design Protocol for Australian Cities*, which is organised under the headings people, place and process, emphasise the capacity of integrated 'design, leadership and governance' to 'cultivate healthy, cohesive and inclusive communities' (Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development 2011, p. 7).

COAG has established nine criteria for assessing capital city strategic planning systems. Within these criteria, there is reference to the capacity to deliver socially sustainable communities, such as 'appropriate consultation and public engagement with external stakeholders, experts and the wider community'. The criteria also identify the aim for 'world class urban design and architecture' (COAG 2009, p. 21).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has also initiated a project called Measures of Australia's Progress (MAP) which is designed to help Australians address the question, 'Is life in Australia getting better?'. MAP provides a digestible selection of statistical evidence in answer to this question, grouped under three broad headings: the society, the economy and the environment. Australians can use this evidence to form their own view of how our country is progressing, not only economically, but socially and environmentally as well.

State and territory government

State and territory governments are responsible for effectively planning and managing our cities and communities. They are best placed to facilitate different levels of government working together.

State governments are able to work directly with local government in engaging the community and relevant stakeholders, and ensure a focus on equity when developing planning strategies.

State governments are able to work with the federal government through COAG to support the rollout of integrated design approaches to achieve wellbeing for all Australians.

Local government

Local government interacts closely at the local level with people's daily lives. Its role in supporting social sustainability includes providing physical and soft infrastructure within the community, recognising and facilitating community input to strategic planning issues and coordinating service providers within the community to work effectively to address local issues.

State and local governments also have a role to play in extending accountability mechanisms across both government and non-government developments, to ensure delivery of all projects have social sustainability as a strong focus.

A good example of state and local governments working together is seen in the Community Indicators Projects. There are a growing number of these groups operating across Australia. The Australian Community Indicators Network provides a forum for these groups to collaborate and share resources (Australian Community Indicators Network, undated).

Community Indictors Victoria, one of the first community indicator projects in Australia, is a state wide resource which provides a framework for measuring wellbeing. The community wellbeing indicator framework, which has almost 80 community wellbeing indicators, is used to engage with communities, identify issues and provide a basis for local government decision making.

Community Indicators Queensland is a similar body that has developed a draft framework for measuring community wellbeing in Queensland. 'It aims to provide a platform for: investigating the measurement of policy effectiveness; community engaged policy making; and the development and implementation of national and international community wellbeing indicator frameworks' (ABS 2012, p. 46). This framework has been used as a basis for developing indicators for community resilience.

Community and NGOs

The role citizens play in creating social sustainability is vital. They are the activators of community and the participants who cooperate and create the networks and social bonds of community resilience. To promote and support socially sustainable communities, it is important that community members recognise their rights and responsibilities in the process of creating the fabric of their community, acknowledging they are the current and ongoing 'custodians' of their local region. Communities need to be able to seek assistance, if necessary, from government and non-government partners to build community capacity.

When involved in an urban design process, communities have the right to be heard, and to be represented by community alliance groups. Communities should be encouraged to actively participate in the design process rather than simply be passively present or presented to.

A key community driven project is the Australian National Development Index (ANDI). The ANDI, a project involving over 40 community organisations, aims to introduce a holistic measure of progress in Australia that includes wellbeing and sustainability. This group states that:

> In the past two decades, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a 'global movement' (Giovannini 2008) has developed around the need to move 'Beyond GDP' and to develop new ways of 'Measuring the Progress of Societies' which provide 'a more comprehensive view of progress that takes into account social and environmental concerns as well as economic ones' (ABS 2008, p.4). These new ... measures have emerged as a valuable tool for integrated planning, a firmer evidence base for policy, and a stronger, more citizen-engaged democracy (Salvaris 2010, p. 1).

PART B – Designing for social sustainability

Inclusive design process

> Much is already known about how governments, planners, architects and developers can work together to achieve [social sustainability]. However, the challenge is to integrate this thinking into professional practice as well as public policy. (Woodcraft et al 2011, p. 49)

The complexity of what social sustainability means to a given community and the fact that measurements of success are largely project specific mean the process through which a project is realised is critical to its social sustainability. Prior to any physical outcomes, an inclusive design process can contribute to social sustainability by bringing people together, creating social links and networks within a community, and by empowering people though engagement in the decision making about their communal spaces.

An inclusive design process is one that openly and genuinely engages with design options to consider possible visions for the future. It incorporates a broad range of views and needs and advocates for them. It requires an equitable engagement with a diversity of customs, age groups, backgrounds and ideas, all of which can challenge a traditional design process.

An inclusive design process can be complicated and there are varying degrees of inclusiveness. Who will be engaged, how they will be engaged, and what they will be engaged with, should be established at the outset to ensure that project aims are met, that community expectations are managed, and that people can meaningfully contribute.

Architects influence the process of urban development and their impact upon the population's capacity to achieve social sustainability should not be underestimated. The public impact of an inclusive design process can be as important to achieving social sustainability as the outcome of the designed place.

With this in mind, the architect's role can expand to include a responsibility to broker the best outcome for multiple stakeholders, including the fee-paying client and public users of the design (whose voice may need to be sought). The client brief must include adequate provision to resource this facilitation process.

The role of the architect is to be considerate of the needs of all citizens in a community. This involves engaging all ages and culturally diverse groups, allowing participants to have a voice.

When working with a community scale client group, an inclusive designer will use a suite of techniques to engage with the diversity of the broader community. This is important to ensure the designer utilises and adapts different engagement techniques, which are responsive to different groups across cultural and generational differences, thus maximising the chance to elicit effective engagement. In turn, communities need to acknowledge the importance of mutual trust that is required in working together in an open exploration of future possibilities.

The Young Foundation report identifies the importance of an inclusive design process. It highlights that one of the key elements of success for empowering a community (thereby contributing to its wellbeing and ongoing social sustainability) is engaging the residents in the process of the design of that community.

Specifically, it suggests that design professionals can (Woodcraft et al 2011, p. 41):

- Provide community advocacy for future residents
- Involve the community in active planning, such as urban design charettes
- Identify projects where residents can meaningfully contribute to the design, development and management of physical spaces and places
- Engage in 'intensive consultation on built environment proposals'.

Design led process – allowing the process to lead the outcome

One way of encouraging an inclusive design process is to allow the process to lead the outcome. Architects are accustomed to using the design process to inform the design. Many have skills that can be adapted to a design led process with stakeholders. A design led process is one that translates, interprets and communicates design options; such a process may have several stages, including research, evaluation of case studies, development of an investigative brief, and design testing. In this process, a design proposal itself evolves through the engagement with its stakeholders.

A design led process begins with research to frame what issues are at stake, which parties are affected and involved, and what the parameters for change might be. Following the research to frame the design task, investigation of a range of international and national precedents addressing related issues assists in creating a compilation of precedent design responses and their outcomes.[2] Engaging stakeholders in a discussion about these case studies allows them to consider the design options in the case studies alongside the eventual solutions that were chosen. This then helps them to determine the appropriateness of the case study design options for their own situation. This process of reviewing case studies reveals the stakeholders' priorities and values, and can thus begin to form the basis for writing an investigative brief.

The design team can then prepare the investigative brief. This brief is used to explore and 'test' possible future scenarios based on design options that prioritise or emphasise particular values and performance outcomes. It is important at this point that a number of possible future scenarios are explored, rather than a singular proposal. These possible futures can then be presented back to the stakeholders (both within government and the community). Again, their responses reveal how well the design propositions meet the expressed values and priorities. This process is a form of 'design testing' and each stage reveals, through participation, what could be possible and which options are supported. It is an iterative process and may transit through many design stages before an agreed solution or design proposal is found. For this reason it requires investment in the design process itself. The aim is that everyone participating feels some ownership in the design and that potential conflicts are resolved or mitigated through the process.

The architect's role is to facilitate this form of design led engagement to translate narratives of possible futures from verbal and written modes to visual forms. This might include physical models which give the public insight to better understand the scale and relationships of the urban realm which might otherwise remain abstract in a written report.

Figure 4. Project Tag as designed (above) and as installed (below) on National Youth Homelessness Matters Day. (images: Integrated Design Commission)

2 Here, an outcome refers to what happened over time and whether the design response in fact created the desired outcome.
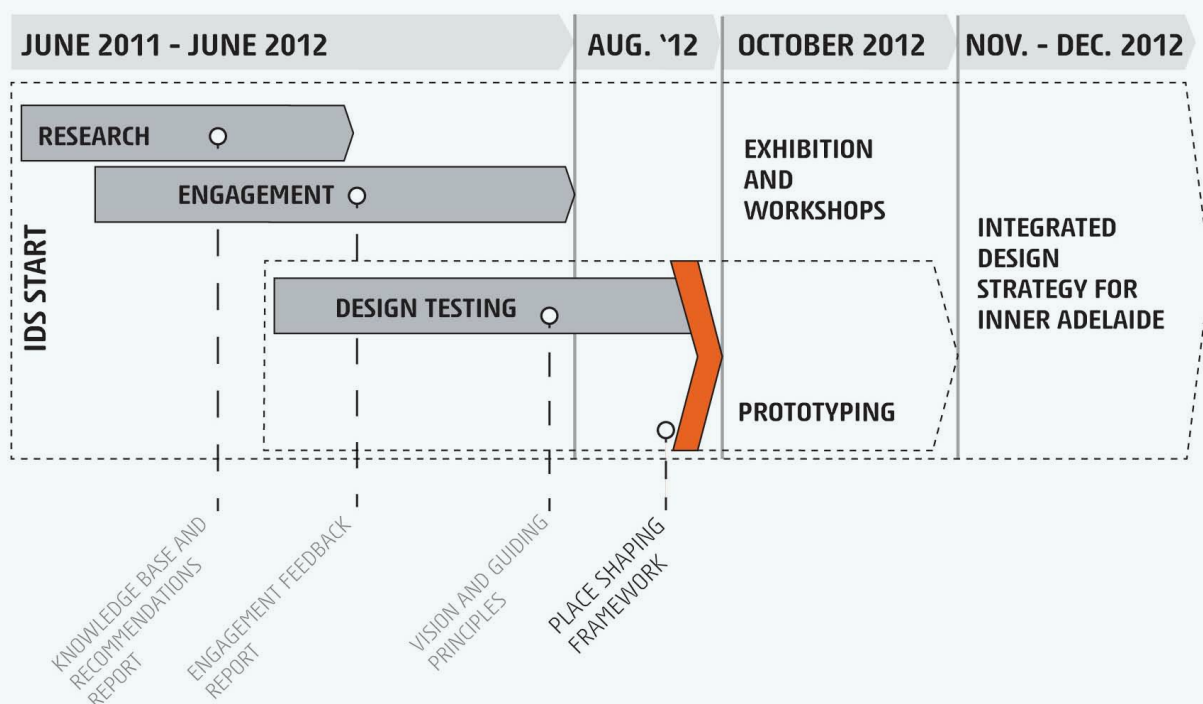
Figure 5. Place Shaping Framework process diagram. (Source: Integrated Design Commission)

Australian examples of an inclusive design led process

As the above design led process describes, '[a]n interactive, dynamic and responsive process requires the language, visualisation techniques and interpretive abilities of urban design professionals' (*5000+ Engagement Feedback Report*, p. 238). The value of a design led process of public engagement was demonstrated by the national pilot project, '5000+ an Integrated Design Strategy for Inner Adelaide', which involved coordination across three tiers of government. (For more information, see 5000plus.net. au.) As a result of co-ordinating the values and vision of multiple stakeholders across government, industry and community, the project also demonstrated an effective example of an integrated approach to design.

5000+ is a design led project of renewal and reactivation of inner Adelaide conducted over four iterative stages. The first stage, which commenced in 2011, involved research of the contingent issues, as well as assembling national and international precedents (as outlined above). The second stage involved an 18-month engagement with a diversity of stakeholders including the public of Adelaide, design professionals, businesses, not-for-profit organisations, government agencies and academia, utilising online and face-to-face strategies. This second stage overlapped with the third, the design testing, which involved discussing and testing ideas, priorities and design propositions.

The second and third stages culminated in October 2012 with a public exhibition of the outcomes, called *Collaborative City*, to which the public could again respond, indicate the temperature of their support, and reflect on the outcomes of their participation in the earlier engagement process. The exhibition also presented of a number of documents reflecting and synthesising the engagement process. This included a vision and a set of guiding principles to inform both public and private projects, as well as the draft Place Shaping Framework for inner Adelaide. Following public feedback from the *Collaborative City* exhibition, the final Place Shaping Framework emerged outlining 99 proposals that could be undertaken to shape an integrated approach to the future of inner Adelaide.

The fourth stage, currently underway in 2013, is implementing those 99 proposals in a way that prioritises investment to ensure greatest value and certainty for the community. Many of the 99 proposals[3] have already been or are currently being implemented. This final step is still in progress and will be for years to come as many of the proposals, strategies and tools are long term in their vision and thus take time to establish and embed. As a national pilot project, it is a significant example of the value a design led process can offer to city making and particularly to the achievement of socially sustainable outcomes.

3 Consistent with the *National Urban Design Protocol for Australian Cities* (Department of Infrastructure & Regional Development 2011) the 99 proposals of the Place Shaping Framework were divided into the categories of people, place and process. See 5000plus.net.au.

Design strategies to achieve physical outcomes

Infrastructure

The Young Foundation 2011 report suggests that having social and physical infrastructure in place for new communities is important to support the development of a new community's sense of shared and common identity. This is also reflected in the Figure 2 diagram. Suggested strategies for the built environment (Woodcraft et al 2011, p. 29) include:

- Early provision of schools, nursery and childcare
- Early provision of basic community infrastructure – multi-function/flexible spaces with co-located services: shop, community centre, health/wellness provision, green space (temporary provision if permanent not initially feasible)
- Good transport and communications connections – including public transport and broadband
- Meanwhile spaces – temporary use of green space, community buildings or housing to meet intermediate needs (e.g. community house instead of a community centre)
- Low carbon infrastructure that connects to health and wellbeing agendas (e.g. encouraging walking and cycling).

Social & cultural life

The Young Foundation report suggests that a rich social and cultural life is created by a combination of factors including the length of residence, an identity of place and a common community history (Woodcraft et al 2011, pp. 32 & 35). Strategies for architects include providing:

- People-friendly layouts e.g. car free areas, speed reductions, eyes on the street, well-lit areas
- Distinctive architecture/landscaping to reinforce/create sense of local identity
- Public and congregational spaces e.g. open spaces, parks, wide pavements, benches
- Third spaces (e.g. cafes, pubs, shops), playgrounds and play spaces
- Connections to neighbouring communities to avoid isolation e.g. pathways and shared public spaces
- Flexible working spaces to encourage home-working, local enterprise (e.g. spaces in a community centre or café).

Adaptable design

The Young Foundation report highlights the importance of allowing places to change over time as neighbourhood character grows, and encouraging the temporary use of spaces (Woodcraft et al 2011, pp. 43 & 47). In particular the report recommends:

- Flexible and adaptable housing
- Flexible and adaptable community bases and buildings (e.g. temporary, multi-use buildings)
- Flexible master-planning, e.g. enabling participation in planning of the later phases.

Local services

As part of a socially sustainable approach to community development, an architect can select materials and services from the local region, and engage local expertise and collective history to inform design direction.

Measuring success

As the first part of this paper suggests, one of the most important steps in working towards social sustainability has been identifying what constitutes success. We are starting to understand what contributes to a socially sustainable community. Frameworks for achieving this, such as the Young Foundation's framework, the social sustainability measurement framework established by Social Life in the UK and the 5000+ approach, are being tested in real projects. However, communities change and our understanding of what makes a community successful must continue to be explored.

To assist in developing this understanding it is important we understand what was effective for different situations. The architect can contribute to this in several ways. In the first instance architects can work with clients to establish their design briefs. A brief that simply outlines accommodation requirements is unlikely to provide a benchmark for measuring social sustainability. A performance brief on the other hand has the capacity to outline social sustainability expectations. This then needs to be followed up. The architect can advocate for and then undertake post occupancy evaluations for user feedback and to document successes and challenges.

Conclusion

Architects have a vital role in contributing to building socially sustainable communities. The rate of population growth in Australia means that there will be ongoing work in building communities into the future. Social sustainability should be a priority for these communities. It is evident from emerging policy trends that the health of communities is an increasingly important factor, both for the design of new places, and in maintaining the health of our current communities as they navigate planning, infrastructure and design changes.

Architects can provide important leadership in realising these ambitions, since their design role affords them a unique opportunity for integrating the desires of numerous parties in realising the objectives of healthy planning, wellbeing and social sustainability through exemplary engagement processes with people and places.

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