

VDD Studio submission to

Parliament of Australia Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee

Inquiry into

Adequacy of existing residential care arrangements available for young people with severe physical, mental or intellectual disabilities in Australia

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February 2015.

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Abstract

In Australia, due to lack of appropriate housing and other systemic disadvantages, a growing number of young people are living in nursing homes or other aged care environments. Such living arrangements are not designed or equipped for young people with specialist needs, often leading to isolation and loneliness. The ongoing lack of an accessible and inclusive built environment plays a crucial role in making young people with disabilities dependent, restricting them from actively participating in various leisure activities, community life and taking care of their daily chores. In the past the built environment has not been held accountable for people with disabilities' reduced access to socio-economic life and contribution to increased dependence on family or carers support. Internationally, built environment designers have increasingly adopted Universal Design, that is, inclusive and accessible design for people of varying ages, genders and abilities, enabling greater degrees of independent living. However understanding of Universal Design within Australia's building design professions is extremely sketchy, resulting in compliance-based, minimum-standards outcomes. Therefore, the introduction of Universal Design education and training in early years of main stream built environment courses needs to be addressed. Enhancement of the Built Environment through adoption of Universal Design will also complement the objectives of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Introduction

Recent research by Summer Foundation and Monash University into '*Young people living in nursing homes*' found that, in Australia, approximately 3300 people under 60 years of age are living in aged care nursing homes due to the lack of practical or feasible alternative arrangements. As the name suggests Aged Care is traditionally designed to provide accommodation, personal and nursing care for elderly people at the end stage of life. Given that the average age of residents is 83 years, aged care environments are generally not equipped to take care of young people with severe physical, mental or intellectual disabilities. Also noted in the research, due to prolonged stays commonly resulting in declining visits from friends, young people living in nursing homes are an often marginalized and isolated group within society. This further restricts participation in various activities undertaken by other younger people such as, leisure and recreation, visiting family and friends, or active involvement in their community.

SHUT OUT: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia, a National Disability Strategy Consultation Report prepared by the National People with Disabilities and Carer Council, states that the famous 'fair go' ideal does not extend to people with disabilities. Compounding social and systemic disadvantages, the report highlights that the lack of inclusive and accessible public transport, parks, schools, housing and buildings plays a crucial role in creating barriers. Denial of access to these services creates isolation and loneliness.

Housing choice for young people with disabilities

Young people with disabilities need to have the same residential care housing choices as other Australians. Accessible housing allows access and use by most occupants and visitors including people with a disability or some form of mobility impairment. Visitable housing allows most people to visit a home with dignity including staying overnight and for a person with a disability to reside temporarily. Adaptable housing has provisions that enable a home to be altered without major structural works and at much lower cost, to make it accessible and usable in future. The National Disability Insurance Scheme, to be implemented throughout Australia by 2018-2019, will help young people with disabilities to make their own decisions about their capacity to live independently and make home modifications according to their needs. This will support young people with disabilities by giving them freedom to choose the ways they want to live their life, achieve their goals and participate in social and economic life.

However, the NDIS alone will not solve the disadvantages faced. Most of the existing built environment: housing, parks, public places, public transport, taxis, emergency exits, etc, is not accessible. Such a major limitation discourages participation in community life, employment, and education. Hence there is a strong and urgent need to improve our built environment so that people of all abilities can independently access places at will with dignity.

Universal Design: better environments for young people with disabilities

In *Fundamental Principles of Disability*, Vic Finkelstein argued that the problems faced by people with disabilities were caused by society's failure to take account of their needs, not by the person's impairment. Disability is often viewed as a medical or institutional issue. The inability of the built environment to satisfy the accessibility needs of people with disabilities, thereby creating major barriers, is seldom recognised. Universal Design is a design approach that advocates for holistic environments able to be accessed, understood and used to the greatest degree possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. This design approach is not a special requirement approach focusing only on the benefits for members of minority groups. Rather it supports the vast majority by providing: accessible, usable, convenient and easy to use, environments.

Universal Design Education: educating designers to design better environments

Although Universal Design/Inclusive Design is known internationally the current tendency in Australia is to merely consider it in terms of compliance with the requirements of the Building Code of Australia (BCA). The primary reason for this attitude can be attributed to the glaring absence of Universal design teaching in design curriculum. There is also a misunderstanding that Universal

Design is only about accessibility for people with disabilities and thereby needing to be dealt with by specialists. Hence it is rarely considered a fundamental starting point in all design activities. This lack of educational emphasis then continues to be a hindrance in professional work as well, where access is treated as a BCA code compliance issue at the end of the design process rather than an essential right of access issue forming the nucleus of the entire design process, from the initial programming through to the finishing details.

Teachers attitudes at early training stages, mentors and supervisors attitudes, and the attitudes and actions of professional bodies all contribute to the formation of one's design ethos. (*Social Justice in Architecture, NAAB Validation Conference, 2003*) Therefore teaching Universal Design should start with promoting an accessible design studio culture which encourages students and/or teachers with disability to participate effectively, thereby making the educational environment and educational methods more accessible. Rethinking and redesigning the studio culture will help address this challenge and will also be a potential venue for increasing awareness of human equity issues. People-centric studio exercises would be the starting point for all students to think about design strategies appropriate to different ages, race, gender, abilities, religion and socio-economic backgrounds. Universal Design training will embed an understanding of how to design for everyone. Currently however, Universal Design is not taught as a design approach due to lack of awareness and a preconception that the resultant design will not be aesthetically appealing.

Recognising these concerns, in 2001 the Council of Europe adopted a resolution entitled '*The Tomar Resolution – On the Introduction of the Principles of Universal Design into Curricula of all Occupations Working on the Built Environment*'. This document, created to influence and shape legislation and policy at a European and national level, outlined recommendations to member states with regard to the teaching of Universal Design to built environment professionals.

Centre for Excellence in Universal Design

In response to the above Ireland's Disability Act (2005) provided for the establishment of a Centre for Excellence in Universal Design as part of the National Disability Authority. The specific role for this Centre, as set out in the Disability Act 2005 is "... *In relation to assisting and promoting the introduction of the principles of universal design to courses of education and training, the Centre shall liaise with vocational and third level educational institutions and with professional bodies by providing courses of education and training in Universal Design for persons preparing to engage in work affecting the environment or engaged in such work.....* ". In recognition of the Centre's role in advancing equality and community participation it falls under the responsibility of the Irish government's Department of Justice.

During the inaugural Universal Design Conference in Sydney last year Susan Ryan, Australia's current Age and Disability Discrimination Commissioner, backed the idea that adoption of inclusive design principles by Australia's built environment profession would support the implementation of both age care reform and the National Disability Insurance Scheme. This can be achieved by the

establishment of a Centre for Excellence in Universal Design similar to that initiated by the Irish Government in 2007. It is strongly believed that following Ireland's lead Australia can get to a point where we not only have a Centre for Excellence in Universal Design but a society and an economy that embraces such a design ethos. (*Advocacy builds for Australian Universal Design Centre, Linda Belardi, 2014*)

Universal Design knowledge resulting in improved living environments for young people with disabilities can be facilitated through educational endeavours and government initiatives. The government needs to play a major role to initiate and promote practices that incorporate Universal Design solutions for young Australian people with disabilities who currently live in or are at risk of living in inappropriate residential aged care environments. Promoting and applying Universal Design thinking in public projects will be a way towards achieving cost savings and maximising positive impact. Good practice in government projects and procurement can be used as a model to inform the preparation of resources to further enable Universal Design education. Universal Design will more likely gain momentum if it demonstrates its advantages in many disciplines rather than narrowly focusing on disability.

Conclusion

The number of people living with physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairments is increasing, so is the life expectancy of people with particularly severe or multiple impairments. With the introduction of the NDIS people with disabilities will be able to live more independently but only within their housing limits. The ability of a person to remain as independent as possible can be influenced by how accessible and usable products, services and environments are. If the built environment remains unchanged and inaccessible it will continue to proscribe young people with disabilities full involvement in society. Promotion of Universal Design should be integral to the implementation of the NDIS so people with disability can enjoy their full rights.

The United Nations has recognised Universal Design as critical to shaping inclusive and sustainable environments. To engender an inclusive and accessible built environment throughout Australia the concept of Universal Design should be a fundamental and compulsory part of training curricula for all built environment professionals at all levels. Particularly in the context of improving the living environments of young Australian people with disabilities who currently live in or are at risk of living in inappropriate residential aged care environments, the establishment of a Centre of Excellence for Universal Design tasked with: providing training on how to teach Universal Design effectively, designing curricula and bridging the gap between academics and professionals is an imperative.

Recommendations

Introducing and furthering Universal Design will likely be optimised by utilising both a top-down and bottom-up approach. From the top, Federal and State governments can further promote practices that incorporate Universal Design solutions. Promoting and applying Universal Design thinking in public projects will be a way towards achieving cost savings and maximising positive impact. Good practice in government projects and procurement can be used as a model to inform the preparation of resources to further enable Universal Design education.

In order to ensure the best possible built environment outcomes for young people with disabilities, successful implementation of Universal Design education requires:

- The establishment of a Centre for Excellence in Universal Design which, oversees curricula, provides training for academic staff and teachers of Universal Design and ensures it is being taught accurately and effectively with the most up-to-date, high quality course content.
- Promotion of human diversity within built environment education settings by increasing the involvement of students and/or teachers with disabilities through the creation of accessible, comfortable, welcoming campus environments.
- Integration at an early stage (undergraduate) of curriculum development as well as continuous professional development.
- The identification or creation of experts at various levels to introduce and apply Universal Design principles in academic curricula.
- Further research to inform best-practice Universal Design teaching to students across different disciplines. Research will also be needed to examine how best to assess Universal Design content and competencies in exams, awards and associated accreditations. In particular, additional research is needed to examine the teaching approaches that lead to embedding Universal Design principles and processes across a range of courses and to ensure that they lead to utilisation of the knowledge in professional practice.

Armed with the enhanced knowledge and understanding of Universal Design resulting from the recommendations outlined above, built environment professionals will be able to work directly with young people with disabilities and their representative organisations to significantly improve social inclusion and quality of life outcomes.

References

Full references available on request